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THE Drab Princess,
THE Black Cat,
AND THE Satisfying
Break-up





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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 1

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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 1

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Vi

Frosty Archmage
Viol's supposed
black cat familiar...?

Seren

A duke's daughter.
Dubbed the Drab Princess because
she looks plainer than her younger sister.
The hardest worker of them all!



Helios

The crown prince and
Seren's fiancé.

Marietta

Seren's delicate and
gorgeous younger sister.

Seren 1

The Drab Princess Decides to Break Off Her Engagement

JUST as I was about to push open the doors of the palace's salon, I heard raucous laughter coming from within, and my hand froze. Mixed in with the sound of men laughing, there was one, higher, sweeter laugh that I could hear.

Mm-hm. So Marietta is here today. No wonder everyone seems to be enjoying themselves so much... Nodding to myself, I was just about to open the door when a remark from inside made me gasp with shock, staying my hand.

"Look, what I'm saying is that you'd better make your intentions clear, Prince Helios. Just announce that it'd be better for you to marry Marietta."

"Right, right! Both Marietta and Seren are the duke's daughters, so what's the problem?"

"Totally! It's best just to come right out and say it. I mean, if it were me, I'd choose Marietta over Princess Drab any day of the week."

Princess Drab.

Those words drove a dagger right into my heart.

I wonder when I'd first realized that people were using that cruel nickname to mock me behind my back.

Compared to my younger sister Marietta, with her waves of golden hair, porcelain skin, rosy cheeks, and big, jade green eyes, it was true that my features were somewhat plain. In fact, we barely looked like sisters. I had nondescript light brown hair, and my eyes were brown too, but very small and narrow compared to my sister's. Even my eyelashes were only half as long as Marietta's.

"There's no way I can just come out and say it..."

I stiffened up even further as I heard my fiancé's voice—Prince Helios, the crown prince. From the conversation so far, he was evidently present. But the sound of his voice confirmed it.

“Our engagement has been set since birth. And Seren has been raised as a future queen, taking it all very seriously. My father and the cabinet ministers all have enormous faith in her. If I so much as began saying anything like that, they'd shut me down instantly. I can just see it.”

“*Hmm...* It's true she has a flawless reputation.”

“Right. So if I so much as even suggest otherwise, I could end up being totally disinherited.” Prince Helios chuckled as he spoke.

“Yeah, but...even if she's the best choice to keep the country stable, there's *much* more than that involved in being a good wife to a prince.”

“Right! Right! One smile from Marietta or even a simple ‘You can do it!’ and I could move mountains.”

“Oh my! Is that so?”

“Totally! And it wouldn't just be me, either. If the people saw you waving and smiling down at them, boy, they'd be motivated to make the most of themselves, too! That's what I think, anyway...”

“You're not wrong. Marietta's beauty is the talk of the town.”

“When she rides through town in a carriage, the people flock just to catch a glimpse of her.”

As the conversation continued, the things they said made me feel like all the blood was draining from me. All this time, I thought all I had to do was question nothing, apply myself fully to my royal studies, and assist Prince Helios as princess consort in every way.

But even I'd noticed how the people increasingly clamored for Marietta, flocking for a glimpse of her in town. *Perhaps the subjects would prefer Marietta as their princess consort, as well.*

“The same goes for you too, right, Prince Helios? Wouldn't you be the best man you could be, if you had a woman like Marietta cheering you on?”

"Hmm... How could I fail to be inspired with beauty like that at my side?"

"Ooh, really? That's so sweet!" Marietta exclaimed sweetly.

"See, just like I've been saying."

There was a long silence, then I heard Prince Helios heave a huge sigh. "Still... talking about it won't change reality. Besides, Seren should be arriving soon. Let's wrap this up."

"Pah! We're only thinking of what's best for you, Your Highness."

"Just because you can't marry Marietta for real, don't go locking her up in the women's wing of the palace, you hear? She's the sun around which we all revolve."

"I wouldn't do that."

I trembled to hear Prince Helios speak in such a loathsome way.

I'd no idea about any of this.

I'd no idea that he was so dissatisfied at the prospect of marrying me. But because of his position, he couldn't speak his mind, so he'd just gone along with it.

I tried to hold back my tears, but they spilled over and splashed onto the floor.

Ever since my father first told me that he was my fiancé, I'd adored Prince Helios. He was born about six months after me, so he was a year behind me at school. He was a generous sort who remained open-minded toward everyone, regardless of their status or position.

I really admired everything about him. His unprejudiced worldview, his skills as a swordsman and huntsman, which he honed in addition to his rigorous royal training, and the earnest and serious approach he took toward all his public duties.

I loved his short, blond hair that shone beautifully like the sun and his purple eyes, so striking and intense against the rest of his handsome face. He had a strong, muscular frame, perhaps as a result of all his training, which I also thought was just marvelous.

He treated everyone the same way, no matter who they were. Come to think of it, he never treated me any differently from anyone else, even though I was his fiancée. Still, I swooned over the decorous and polite way he spoke to me.

But Prince Helios wasn't what I thought at all.

It was Marietta he loved. He found being engaged to me most unpleasant. It was clear that he planned to keep up appearances in front of me, pasting on a fake smile as long as we were together. Telling himself that he'd no other choice but to get on with the hand life had dealt him.

What an unhappy life that would be for both of us...

I wished the prince nothing but happiness. I wanted him to live a life filled with only genuine smiles and laughter. But I was the very thing keeping him from that.

The tears kept on flowing.

No one must see me like this. Carefully, silently, I tiptoed away from the door. *But where can I go? Where to hide this tear-stained face?*

Anywhere in close proximity to the salon, where everyone was gathered, came with a high risk of bumping into someone. Hiding my face behind my folding fan, I hurried down the corridor and ran outside.

Several buildings were located just outside the palace. First came the knight barracks and a blacksmithing forge. A little farther down the way from there were the mage quarters and the herb garden. Then just past that was a landscaped garden.

The landscaped garden and herb garden would both be teeming with people. And knights were always coming and going from the barracks and the forge. All raised to be perfect gentlemen, they'd never be able to turn a blind eye to a sobbing maiden. In fact, there was no riskier place.

Mopping my tears with a handkerchief and raising my eyes heavenward, I spotted the mage quarters out of the corner of my eye. *I should be safe over there.*

My feet made their way there. The mage quarters were full of scholarly types,

engrossed in their laboratories, working on their research. I'd heard that they barely even interacted with each other. That they were wholly unconcerned with the doings of others.

The top floor, where the most important research was conducted, was off-limits to those without clearance. But the ground floor should have been freely accessible to all.

I hurried inside the mage quarters, quickly found a bathroom, and flung myself inside.

Oh, phew! I made it without running into anyone, just as the rumors suggested. I was glad that I'd memorized the layout of the palace grounds when I took that tour as part of my princess consort training.

Safely sequestered, I allowed the tears to fall and waited until I could calm down.

I wasn't going to let myself think about it, but I kept replaying the scene in the salon. The harsh things the others said and the irritated tone in Prince Helios's voice as he spoke of me...they all kept spinning around in my head, sending fresh tears cascading down my cheeks as soon as the old ones dried.

I seemed to have been more emotionally gutted by it than I'd realized.

I am such a fool. Crying won't solve anything.

Still weeping, I tried my best to think about what I should do now.

It was true. I'd dedicated everything to my training as the next princess consort. I wanted to be of use to Prince Helios of course, but my efforts also garnered so much genuine happiness from Father, Mother, the king, and the queen.

I'd studied so hard, in fact, that they'd even told me I'd "nothing left to learn." But these were all skills that anyone could learn, given enough effort.

Marietta's beauty and charm, though, were things she'd come by naturally. Even if I expended every last inch of effort, I could never attain even a vague semblance of the same. Viewed that way, my merits seemed so commonplace. Effort meant nothing in the face of natural gifts.

If Marietta had been the one to undergo the same extensive princess consort training, then she would have been a force to be reckoned with. I would have been all but invisible next to her. Even now, one smile from Marietta was said to have the power to inspire men. She already had so much over me. I couldn't even begin to compare.

As I began to calm down and really think it over, I realized that I actually...*agreed* with the things my fiancé and his friends had been saying.

As unhappy as it made me.

Marietta, indeed, would've made the better bride.

Just picturing the faces of those I presumed were present in the salon was enough to summon another wave of frustrated tears.

I had sworn to support Prince Helios in the future. To stand proudly by his side.

Why, the prince and I had discussed difficult matters of diplomacy on more than one occasion. I thought that we were allies... It hurt to know that he'd never fully accepted me as his future wife.

I also felt...*bad* for him. Like I'd wasted his time. *If only I'd noticed his true feelings earlier, I would never have expended so much time and effort on princess consort training.*

"If I so much as even suggest otherwise, I could end up being disinherited completely."

I recalled how he had said those words with such a self-derisive chuckle.

Well, if Prince Helios's hands were tied, it fell to me to be the one to act. That way, no one would be hurt, least of all the man fated to carry the weight of the kingdom on his shoulders someday.

But having said that, it'd be extremely difficult for me to be the one to initiate the dissolution of our engagement. Neither Father nor Mother would take kindly to such a notion. Besides, I could never ask such a grievous favor of them.

And so, I made up my mind.

I knew one way to get out of this without anyone getting hurt. If I gave it my

all and was willing to stake my life on its success, then it might just be the way to go. At any rate, I was going to give it a try.

Once I settled on my plan, the tears dried up on their own. Now that I had a plan, all I had to do was focus on carrying it out. That would prove far more constructive than crying alone in a bathroom stall.

I wiped away my tears, walked out of the stall with my head held high, and composed my face in the mirror.

No more tears.

My tears always ceased as soon as I hit upon a concrete plan to fix whatever problem I was having. I scrutinized myself harshly in the mirror. My nose and eyes were still red, but that would pass as I walked in the fresh air.

There will be no going back.

Anyway, since Marietta was there and proving a distraction today, the salon work was no doubt barely even halfway done. I might cease to be a royal bride-to-be very soon, but at that moment, I still had my duties to consider.

I hurried along a secluded back passage that led from the mage quarters to the palace. Midway I spotted a black shadow on a bench, almost hidden. The sight of it made me come to a sudden halt, my body stiffening.

Someone's down here? That's unexpected... I should probably return the way I came before they spot me.

Hesitating, I peered over at the figure on the bench. Then I gasped in shocked recognition.

Isn't that...?

It must've been six months since I first crossed paths with him. His appearance reminded me of the darkest of nights. That was the impression he gave me.

Everything he wore, from his robe to his boots, was blacker than the blackest black. His hair and eyes, too, were a distinctive midnight shade that was rare to see in this land.

But he wasn't...unpleasant to look at. Quite the opposite. His hair, tied back in

a single ponytail, shone like a raven's wing and his eyes were like black onyx. All the black of his features stood out in striking harmony with his pristine white skin.

But his eyes were sharp, coldly piercing whomever they were fixed upon.

"The Frosty Archmage of the Third Mage Guild," he was called, and his title seemed apt. But...the man seated on the bench in front of me was, for some reason, wearing a sappy smile on his face.

"Lord...Viol?"

Such was my surprise that I found myself speaking his name aloud without meaning to. In a panic, I clapped my hand over my mouth. He lifted his head in surprise, and upon locking eyes with me, his mild expression suddenly grew stiff.

As the half-eaten cupcake started to tumble out of his grasp, I yelped in spite of myself.

"Your cupcake!"

"I"

With surprisingly good reflexes, Lord Viol snatched the tumbling cupcake out of thin air. Then, he heaved a sigh of relief, as did I.

I would have felt terrible if he'd lost his chance to eat it because of me. He seemed to be enjoying it so and *I* was the one who'd interrupted him. I was relieved to see that it'd survived its tumble with merely a crumble.

"I'm so terribly sorry."

I lowered my gaze in solemn contrition and made to scurry past Lord Viol. *How rude of me to interrupt, simply because the sight of him gave me pause. Surely, he has no further wish to look upon me.*

Just as I was about to pass by...

"Wait."

He bid me stop, using that icy voice. I turned around, tentatively. Lord Viol was glaring at me, his face a mask of indignance.

Terrifying.

His expression was frosty. Where was the sweet smile he'd worn just moments ago? Had I imagined it?



Come to think of it, everyone always said that Viol was the sort you'd never catch smiling or showing any emotion. *Why had I ever spoken to a man like him?* I wished I could go back in time to a few moments before to give myself a good slap.

"It's Lady Seren, isn't it? What's a duke's daughter doing wandering these parts?"

"I'm very sorry."

"I didn't ask for an apology. You just came from the mage quarters, did you not?"

I gulped.

Lord Viol was only twenty-five, but he was a mage guild member. The royal family trusted him. So much so, in fact, that he belonged to the Third Mage Guild, assigned to protect the kingdom. No doubt he'd be suspicious if a random noblewoman came walking out of the mage quarters. After all, what possible business could she have there?

"And what's wrong with your face? Have you been crying?"

Gack... He'd even seen through the fact that I'd been crying.

"...There's...nothing wrong whatsoever."

"It doesn't look like there's nothing wrong with your face like that."

He called me out so brazenly that I couldn't even grunt in defiance. Lord Viol seemed to be the type who didn't mince words.

"...Oh, I see how it is. Incidentally, your sister's here paying a visit today, is she not? The rest of the mages couldn't stop talking about it."

Infuriatingly, my shoulders jerked back in response, a movement that could hardly fail to go unnoticed. Lord Viol got this "Uh-huh, I thought so" look on his face just from that. He was said to be colder than the ice he could conjure, but his thoughts still showed on his face as much as anyone else's did.

As I stood there, he continued to stare rudely at my face. Then he sighed once and pointed to the empty space on the bench beside him.

“Sit. You’re still not fit to be seen in public yet.”

With no other choice, I sat down tentatively beside him. *Is my face really such a mess?* I wondered as I prodded a cheek, my mind whirling with my situation.

It seemed I had no other choice but to spill my guts. Lord Viol knew I’d been crying and seemed to have somehow already guessed that Marietta was part of the reason why. I’d like to think that an Archmage wouldn’t be interested in gossip. But then again, I didn’t know Lord Viol at all.

Could I trust him to keep whatever I told him a secret, just between us?

I stared down at my hands folded on my lap as I sat primly on the bench. I was thinking hard. From the corner of my eye, I could see the cupcake that had been rescued from its tumble. Lord Viol was cupping it in his hands.

...That’s it.

I smirked internally. In the recesses of my mind, I’d struck on a wonderful idea. *Ah, thank the gods! Their divine hands must have surely orchestrated this chance meeting. Prince Helios, rest assured. I shall dissolve our engagement without anyone getting hurt.*

With my fists clenched, I made this solemn vow. Then, head still low, I cleared my throat and spoke.

“Please eat it.”

“What?”

“You were just about to eat it, weren’t you? Your cupcake. Please, don’t mind me. Go ahead and eat.”

“Oh. Right...”

Lord Viol sounded hesitant. Embarrassed, even. He was cringing slightly. Possibly, he didn’t want to be watched as he ate.

After all, he was the Archmage who oversaw the Third Mage Guild, was he not?

After some prevaricating, he began to eat his cupcake. His earlier sappy smile was absent now. But he was still clearly engaged in enjoying his treat. *Good.*

That'd put a temporary stop to the probing questions he was asking me. A win-win for us both.

"Lady Seren..."

"You really like cake, don't you?"

I cut him off and changed the subject abruptly. I needed him to hear me out.

"My work requires brainpower. Sometimes I crave sweets. Please don't make a big deal out of it."

I couldn't help grinning as he begrudgingly answered me.

Of course. I'll take it to the grave with me.

Viol 1

A Serious Affair, Indeed

“PLEASE don’t make a big deal out of it.”

The moment I said those words, I knew I’d made a mistake. Lady Seren’s dour expression suddenly lit up into a shining smile. That could only mean trouble.

Sure enough, Lady Seren came forward with a certain proposal.

“Of course, I won’t tell a soul. But, Lord Viol... I have a favor to ask of you in return.”

“Then say it.”

I said nothing about granting her request. I was just curious what a girl hailing from one of the most prominent families in the kingdom could possibly have been crying about only moments before.

I knew that she was the king and queen’s favorite. Surely, she wasn’t secretly plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Perhaps she was after a charm or potion, as many young ladies often were.

But my guess couldn’t have been more wrong.

“I want you to introduce me to someone who can teach magic. Someone discreet.”

“What?”

“Like a magic tutor. That sort of thing.”

“To teach *who*?”

“*Me*, of course,” she said confidently. “I’ll have you know I’m AA ranked in Magical Power, and I also earned an A rank in Magic Aptitude.”

“With such high ranks, you could work toward becoming a High Mage.”

“Yes.”

Lady Seren beamed. She was in full negotiation mode. There was no longer a single trace of her crystalline tears. As this young woman looked at me with a hint of challenge in her eyes, I saw the same sort of stubborn obstinance that'd led me to leave behind my rural village and pursue my own goal of becoming a High Mage. It was clear that she'd already made up her mind about this.

"What is it you want to learn?" I asked.

"Well... I'd rather discuss that with my tutor directly."

For the first time, I saw evasiveness in her eyes. It was clearly something she was hesitant to discuss.

"If I don't know what it is you want to learn, I can't introduce you to a suitable candidate."

"I understand, but please reconsider. I promise I've no intention of causing trouble for you, Lord Viol. I really think it's better if you don't know the details. You know, what with your standing and everything."

"It's impossible to recommend anyone to you under those circumstances."

"I can certainly see why that would be the case..."

She fell silent and cast her gaze down for a moment. She seemed to be thinking hard. Then she lifted her chin, determination burning in her amber-brown eyes.

"I thought this was the best method to make sure everyone walked away happy...but it'll void the point if I just end up causing trouble for uninvolved parties. I think I had better just do the best I can on my own, after all."

She rose to her feet so swiftly, her skirts swished around her ankles, and she turned to bow to me.

"Lord Viol, please excuse me. Good day."

"Ah, wait—"

"No, I must go. Surely, little work has been achieved in my absence today."

The young lady seemed troubled. Ah, yes, now I remembered. Her younger sister had come to the palace today. The men were probably too busy fawning

over her to see to their tasks. What a waste of precious time.

I curled my lip just thinking of it. But then Lady Seren's chin jerked up, as if she'd just had a sudden thought.

"Um, do I... Do I look presentable now?"

Presentable for what? I wanted to ask. Then I remembered. After all, she'd been skulking in this back alley just to hide her tear-stained face. But the redness around her eyes had faded as she'd tried to make her deal with me, and her nose's ruddy swelling had subsided too. She was...passable.

"You look fine."

"Oh...good."

She smiled, as if relieved. But the tears she so bitterly shed were over her younger sister, were they not? Why, then, was she so desperate to return and make up for the work that'd been delayed due to said sister's presence? What a noble girl she was. I felt a wave of irritation wash over me, but I'd no cause to detain her.

Also, she was a duke's daughter. It would not do for her to be seen loitering in deserted passageways like this. The act was highly risky.

I myself was once a commoner, although I'd since attained the title of Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, effectively placing me as the leader in charge of a whole mage guild. I won my place in society via my own magical ability; family status meant nothing to me. That said, I'd no desire to be caught up in any scandals relating to a nobleman's daughter. And the prince's fiancée, no less. Still, I couldn't deny I was curious about what she intended to do.

"Well, I'll be taking my leave now."

"I told you to wait, didn't I? ...I've thought of a plan."

"A plan?"

"Regarding your private tutor."

"Really?!"

"Yes. When the bell chimes at nine o'clock this evening, open your bedroom

window a hand's width. I shall send my familiar to you. We can leave discussing the details until then."

"Oh, Lord Viol...!"

Lady Seren seemed overjoyed. Grinning widely, cheeks dimpled, she kept repeating "Oh, thank you, good sir!" over and over. And then she left. The glittering of her eyes stayed with me, though. *I think those might've been fresh tears...*

Good grief. What in blazes am I doing...?

I stared after her as she walked down the alley with her head held high until, eventually, she vanished. Then I sighed. This whole thing reeked of trouble, so what was I thinking, willfully getting myself involved?

But for some reason...I just *had* to help her.

"Um, Archmage Viol..."

I whirled around, startled by the voice. This drew a muffled "Heek!" of alarm from— Ah, if it wasn't Contard. My assistant. *You'd think my face would've had a less alarming effect over time. Apparently not.*

"Th-Th-The afternoon meeting i-is..."

"I know."

I know I've got a rather stern sort of face, but surely it doesn't warrant quite this level of fear and trembling? ...It rather hurt my feelings.



WHEN the bell chimed the ninth hour that evening, I paid a visit to Lady Seren's room.

I knew where her father's ostentatious mansion *was*, of course. But even if I didn't, I could still have easily located Lady Seren by detecting her magical energy. *Never make a mage your enemy*, the saying went. It was one I agreed with. A mage could find you while you slept and behead you as easy as breathing.

I slipped from rooftop to rooftop in the inky black of night. Leaping and

scrambling up walls, I used the protruding parts of the building's stonework to work my way up to the likeliest window. As arranged, it was cracked open just wide enough for me to slip my body through the opening.

The fine lace curtains fluttered and flapped in the breeze. I needed to make my way safely inside and have her shut the window at once. Those curtains could draw suspicion. Clearly, I'd been remiss in showing due care and consideration for the young lady whose room I'd entered.

I tapped on the window with a forepaw, and Lady Seren came hurrying toward the window all aflutter.

"Oh, so *cute!!!* Little black cat, are you Lord Viol's familiar?"

"I am."

"Your voice sounds exactly like Lord Viol's!" she exclaimed with delight.

"That's because I'm his familiar."

That's just a front. I'm actually the man himself!

I was not only able to transform into a cat, but I was also able to perform all of a feline's innate physical feats. In these times, I knew of none other than myself who possessed the ability. And I was rather proud of this.

Wanting to show off the perfect spell I'd cast, I stretched each of my slender limbs and curled my tail around me. Lady Seren's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"You're so cute!!! I've always wanted a cat!"

She picked me up and began to lovingly stroke my silky fur.

Drat. I went too far on the feline realism.

It would never do for me to maim the fair hand of a duke's daughter, so I sheathed my claws and tried to struggle free instead. It was useless, though. Her grip was firm. Eventually, I gave up and froze instead.

In truth, I was unsure how to proceed. Often, I'd been a source of terror whilst in my feline form, but I'd never been petted and crooned over before. As I lay still and endured it, I noticed the lace curtains were still flapping in the evening breeze and I heaved a sigh.

“...Please, shut that window. I apologize for not being more prudent.”

“Wow, familiars *are* very diligent, aren’t they? Say, what’s your name?”

“I have no name. Call me what you like.”

“You don’t have a name? That must be quite confusing for Lord Viol...”

I never usually spent much time in this form, so I’d never thought of a name for my cat self before. I heard Lady Seren mutter a pensive “Hmm.” Then a second later, I found myself being lifted up in the air, my eyes level with hers.

“In that case, I’ll just call you Vi! Since you’re Lord Viol’s familiar.”

Lady Seren grinned, her eyes softening happily as they fixed on mine.

Back off! Remove me from your face this instant!

Why is it that whenever humans encounter an animal they find appealing, they seek to be as close as possible to it? Transforming into a cat had been a foolish mistake. A bird would’ve been the better choice. If I was a bird, I could’ve flown out of her vice-like grasp.

I’d always hated communicating with others. It showed plainly on my face, which seemed to frighten people. Now, too, I couldn’t stand the embarrassment of this close scrutiny. I flailed my feline limbs, but she held on with a firm grip. I longed to scratch this duke’s daughter’s face and hands. But I knew that I’d pay dearly for doing such a thing.

I can bear it no longer. Please unhand me!

Ignoring my stricken expression, Lady Seren held me tight against her bosom as she closed the windows. It appeared her ladies-in-waiting had already retired for the night as well.

That was a relief, of course. But then I realized that whatever she planned to discuss with me was something she didn’t want even her ladies-in-waiting to overhear. That thought filled me with trepidation.

“I’ll hear you out. So please unhand me. Master *never* lifts or hauls me about in this fashion. I am not used to such crude manhandling.”

“Oh, really? But you’re so cute!!! Lord Viol *really* never cuddles and snuggles

you like this? What a joyless man he must be!”

Ignoring my order to unhand me, Lady Seren wrapped one arm around my belly and hooked the other one underneath my bottom. Holding me like a newborn babe, she plopped down into a nearby chair.

Why? And how am I to escape from this endless embrace? I observed my feline limbs, which were sticking straight up. Lady Seren whipped out a handkerchief, dipped it into a jug of water, and then seized hold of one of my paws.

Stop!

Surely she didn’t mean to wipe my paws with that pristine handkerchief!

I was in a panic. I couldn’t even imagine what a handkerchief belonging to a duke’s daughter might cost. I struggled and squirmed as much as I dared, but Lady Seren had a tight grip around my belly. I was afraid of catching her arms or clothing with my claws, so I had to temper my struggling somewhat. This, too, added to its ineffectiveness.

“Now, now, settle down! You can’t walk around my room on those paws. Not after you’ve been strolling around outdoors. Rince would be furious. My maid *is* surprisingly scary, you know.”

In the end, I could do nothing as she used her pristine handkerchief to wipe off all four paws.

Good grief...I’m exhausted already and we haven’t even gotten down to business yet. This girl was more capricious than I’d thought.

“Vi, are you angry?” she asked.

“I’m not angry. I just think you should’ve used a different cloth. A disposable one.”

Perhaps she has no such cheap cloth!

“More importantly...let’s get down to business. You said you are in need of a private tutor. What is it you intend to do?”

“Sorry, Vi. I can’t tell anyone but the tutor themselves.”

She's nothing if not careful.

Clearly, it was something she was loath to share. But after what I'd already been through, I was determined to have her spit it out.

"I shall be your tutor."

"You, Vi?! But you're a cat, aren't you?"

"Do not look down upon familiars. I can instruct you better than any mage."

After all, I am one of the finest mages around, if I do say so myself.

"Wow," she said in awe.

This is no time to be stunned, Lady Seren. Please just come out and say what you want.

"Would you *really* be able to help me, though? If possible, I'd like to pass this year's High Mage Examination."

"You're aiming to become a High Mage?!" I cried. "This late in the game? There's only three months until the examination, you know!"

"Wow, Vi. You know a lot for a cat."

"Ack! ...Think of it this way... I know everything my master knows, by default."

It was a weak sort of cover story, I knew that myself. But Lady Seren smiled and nodded, seemingly reassured.

"Oh, then that's good. Everyone says that Lord Viol is the finest mage of his generation, one we haven't seen the likes of for centuries. So then, you'll probably be a great teacher by proximity, wouldn't you, Vi?"

"Ugh... Well, yes."

"Of course, I know how incredibly hard it's going to be to qualify for the examination with only three months to prepare, let alone pass it. But I've got to give it everything I've got."

Lady Seren balled her hands into fists, her gaze filled with determination. I'd never seen a refined lady make fists before.

"I can teach you, of course...but I have to warn you upfront, this endeavor is

pointless. Even esteemed mages who've studied for years at the Royal Magic Academy struggle to pass this exam. You, however, have never gone to a magic school of any kind. Even if you study your brains out for the next three months, it will *never* be enough. That's how tough this exam is."

High Mage. It's a job title that's been coveted by everyone living in this land, at one point or another in their lives.

High Mages are in charge of keeping the magical barrier intact. This barrier is said to be so strong that it can be breached by neither physical nor magical force. Whenever we aren't on barrier duty, we spend our days, from sunup to sunset, inventing new magical tools and techniques. Whenever magical beasts swarm, we mages are the ones who vanquish them, using our overwhelming magical power.

The Third Royal Mage Guild, which I oversee as Archmage, solely consists of a select few elite High Mages who hold the kingdom's safety in their hands.

Not just anyone can *take* the examination, of course. You need to be at least A-ranked in Magical Power and Magic Aptitude with at least a B ranking in Magical Beast Subjugation. Only then will you even be considered for entry into the examination.

The job is highly exclusive and highly prestigious.

Furthermore, upon being appointed, a successful candidate goes from being whoever they were before—be they commoner, orphan, or aristocrat—to being addressed as "High Mage." They attain the same level of prestige as the upper echelons of society and get an enormous paycheck to boot.

It is a dream job. A position within the grasp of only the most talented few.

Many a commoner and orphan urchin alike see this job as their absolute dream and ideal, since it comes with both unfathomable money and prestige, as well as the chance to become a protector of the realm.

"Even so, I must do this. For the sake of the realm and...for him."

Lady Seren was muttering under her breath. I sighed. Certainly, her mind seemed made up. But why would this girl, who was set to be queen someday, want to take the examination to become a High Mage in the first place?

As I mulled it over, the enormity of the situation suddenly dawned on me.

If the intention was always for her to become a High Mage, then surely she would've been sent to the Royal Magic Academy for training. She wouldn't have gone through years of princess consort training the way she did. This could only mean that the decision to do this was Lady Seren's alone.

This is bad. Very, very bad...

If, by some miracle, she did manage to become a High Mage, then she'd lose all claim to her previous status and all links to her family name. It was the same for anyone, be they even the loftiest of aristocrats. If my conjecture was correct, then by becoming a High Mage, she'd bypass her fate as a future queen and royal bride altogether. *Good grief! This is near treason, after all!*

Why?

Her royal comportment teachers spoke of nothing but the dedication she'd shown toward her training. What's more, she was said to be the king and queen's absolute favorite of all the nobility. That *had* to mean she was a success, did it not?

So then, why this abrupt change of heart?

As I was about to ask, I got a sudden flashback of those red-rimmed eyes I'd seen earlier that day.

Could it be...? I scrutinized her. Her small hands, knuckles white, were clasped together tightly and resting on the tabletop. It was clear that she was gripped by the firmest determination there was.

Rising from my sitting position atop the table, I tentatively approached her. Then I laid one paw ever so delicately on top of those white knuckles. Her hand trembled a little in response.

"...Lady Seren, won't you at least tell me the reason? Why have you suddenly decided to stake it all on becoming a High Mage?"

"Well, I..."

Lady Seren cast her eyes down, as if she was having great difficulty speaking of it.

“Do not worry. As you desire, I shall speak no word of this. Anyway, I am but a familiar brought to life by my master purely to assist you. I can speak to no one but you and him.”

This was a lie, of course. But it’d surely prove effective in reassuring her. As predicted, her expression grew much less strained.

“Speak,” I said calmly. “And depending on your situation, I promise to give you the best tutelage there exists to be had.”

The instant those words left my furry lips, Lady Seren’s eyes flashed with determination. Her back straightened. Alarmed by the sudden change in her, my ears pricked up, and my tail went pin straight.

Ah! But I had no time to even think. She’d gotten me by my tiny, shocked face and was pulling me forcefully to her with both hands.

Yikes! Her face was so close to mine!

And yikes! The fervor in those eyes!

“I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything. So please, Vi! Take me ever so seriously!”

...And then the story she told, in fits and starts, turned out to be a shocking one.

Put simply, it appeared that the silly prince had been overheard disparaging Lady Seren, all in order to earn points with her beautiful younger sister. *Truly, he’s an idiot.*

But why should that be reason enough for the earnest Lady Seren to push her younger sister forward as the better bridal candidate, I wondered. It makes no sense.

If a simple word of encouragement from a knockout beauty was all it took to get the men inspired, then surely productivity rates would skyrocket on the days the pretty sister came to visit. And yet, Lady Seren had been concerned about work not getting done at all.

Surely, the young men were all aware of that themselves, including, of course, the silly prince. The one who’d said such vile things about Lady Seren.

“Thank you, Vi.”

While I was sitting there steaming in annoyance, I found myself surprised to be thanked by Lady Seren. She had beads of tears clinging to her trembling lashes. Perhaps recalling the events had been painful for her.

“I made up my mind that I wasn’t going to cry anymore. I’m such a mess! I think I actually really wanted to talk to someone about this.”

“Do not cry. In my opinion, there is no better candidate for future queen than you, Lady Seren.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet, Vi. Yes, I believed that too. That’s why I worked so hard all these years. I think...I think I’m worn out.”

Who wouldn’t be, after being torn down that way, despite many years of supreme effort? I could empathize.

“One thing we learned in royal bride training was the correct use of human resources. By putting certain combinations of people together, you can either greatly improve outcomes or, conversely, scupper them. I think that was the mentality behind them saying those things about me. With a drab queen like me around, none of the men would be inspired to put forth any effort.”

I must protest. You are wrong, woman! Wrong! However...

I had to think a moment. *Should I bolster Lady Seren and send her back to resume her rightful place as the prince’s fiancée? That’d be the best thing for the stability of the realm, of course. But...she would not be happy.*

She’d spend her life covering up for the shortcomings of a silly, spoiled prince, making him look good... She’d spend her days being the butt of jokes made by ignorant fools as she was today. And then she’d cry in dark corners alone...as she did today.

It was ludicrous.

Fools who can never live up to their own potential, who can never produce the right results...they never have any shame. All they do is disparage others, deflecting and projecting to compensate for their own failures.

I’d encountered many of their kind at the Royal Magic Academy. And I’d despised their guts, each and every one of them. How I’d wished to yell at

them, to admonish them to take accountability for their own failures and pull themselves together.

“If I can become a High Mage, my engagement to Prince Helios will automatically become null and void. This is the plan I want to pursue.”

“Very well, Lady Seren. I shall do all I can to assist you on your journey.”

“Oh, Vi! Thank you!”

Clearly delighted, Lady Seren suddenly scooped me off the table and began to twirl around, holding me aloft in her arms.



She had me firmly under the front legs, so there was no danger of slipping. But my hind legs swung unsupported. *Not since I was a child have I... I think I'm going to be sick...*

"D-Dizzy..." I moaned.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Cats have a sensitive inner ear, don't they?"

As I wobbled on the table, Lady Seren rushed to serve me some water in a dish. But I'd not practiced lapping as a normal cat would. I'd have to work on that for next time.

"Are you okay? I'm really sorry."

Lady Seren stroked my back, looking most concerned. I looked up at her weakly.

"I am all right. More importantly, let us begin our training. The hour grows late."

"All right!"

Lady Seren straightened up again, snapping to attention. She was very easy to read. All of her emotions were telegraphed. She was very diligent too. These aspects of her personality must've been what endeared her to the king and queen.

Our kingdom, which is protected stringently by our magical barriers, has seen no real war for a hundred years now. It is a peaceful realm that prospers from foreign trade.

As a result, however, its people tend to be naïve and unguarded. This applies to all, from commoners to royalty. Lady Seren would've been a good queen to this land. She'd have kept it peaceful and safe.

I slowly rose to my feet on the table. Then I stretched all four limbs. The young lady in front of me was watching me with drawn breath. I gazed back into her watchful eyes.

"Today, as a foundation for our studies, I'd like to tell you about what I expect you to do on a daily basis until the day of the examination."

“Okay! Thank you, teacher!”

“The first is a simple technique to increase your magical power. It is a little bit rough but can be mastered by anyone. Only please be careful when you use it.”

Lady Seren might have possessed a lot of magical power, but she’d had scant opportunity to put it into practice. No doubt she lacked the ability to channel it into magical techniques. With some training, she’d be able to subjugate a mid-level beast. As long as she’d some magical power to start with, that was all that mattered.

“One more thing...and this one is quite troublesome. It consumes a large amount of magical power, which can prove a mental drain. Are you all right with that...?”

“We don’t have much time. I’m prepared for anything.”

“Just to warn you, I’m going to have you doing tedious and repetitive things over and over every day from the moment you wake up to the moment you sleep. This technique is abhorred and feared even by the students of the magic academy.”

This training method was *de rigueur* at the magic academy, but few students could keep up with it.

It was surprising how many there were who balked at putting in actual effort, despite their lofty ideals of becoming prestigious High Mages. Even though the method had assured results, few could endure the mind-melting repetition of difficult and tedious tasks.

“Is that how Lord Viol passed the examination?”

“Indeed, it is. The training is still paying off, even now...or, so my master says.”

“In that case, I’ll do it, no matter how hard it is. Please, teach me.”

Lady Seren’s eyes sparkled with determination. At this rate, perhaps things would work out.

“Besides, I’ve spent years doing tedious and boring tasks from sunup to sunset. I’m practically an expert,” she said with a grin.

I couldn't help smiling. In that case, I'd be happy to have her as a fellow High Mage. *We don't have enough people with this sort of grit. We could do with a few more to keep up with the endless and tedious task of maintaining the magical barrier.*

"All right, then. First, I shall cast a small magical barrier. I'd like to see a demonstration of your current level of magical power. Elementary magic is fine. Unleash it toward the magical barrier and let's see what you can do."

Yes, this was good. Time was short, but I'd teach her all I could in the time we had.

Now show me how prepared you really are!

Seren 2

Specialized Training is Tough...

A circular line ran through the air right before my eyes. Then, with a *poof*, a magical barrier appeared, its circumference exceeding the length of my arms.

“Amazing! You really can use some impressive magic, Vi!”

I was so impressed!

I mean, he just looked like an ordinary housecat, after all.

And he spoke exactly like Lord Viol, using grandiose language that was at total odds with his adorable appearance. As we conversed, I kept reminding myself he was Lord Viol’s familiar, whom he’d sent to aid me. Surely, he’d be able to teach me all the magic I needed...and yet he looked like such a sweet little kitty cat.

How shocking it was to see such a tiny fuzzball create such impressive results!

“*Obviously* I can.”

The cat gave me a haughty look, but at the same time, he seemed quite pleased with my genuine admiration. His tail stood straight up, and there was a hint of a prideful grin exposed by the angle of his whiskers.

“Now try to attack this circle,” he instructed. “But don’t miss, whatever you do. You’ll bring the whole room down.”

“Okay! I’ll give it my best shot... Only...”

“What is it?”

“First, you’ll have to teach me the basics of spellcasting!”

“...What?” he hissed.

“I’ve got plenty of magical power and aptitude. But I didn’t go to magic school after all, so that’s where I’m at...”

As my words sunk in, Vi suddenly collapsed.

“Vi?!”

I kept calling his name. But the cat stayed keeled over on his side, silent. Was he playing dead? Worried, I brought my face close to his. His furry lips moved as he seemed to be muttering: “You must be kidding me... This is simply unreal...”

“Um...I’m really sorry. But...Father said that future queens don’t need to learn magic.”

“You uppity girl! You’ve got some nerve, aiming for High Mage at your level!”

Vi scrambled to his feet and arched his back angrily, his tail bristling at me.

I’d done something very offensive; that much was clear. Vi must’ve assumed that everyone knew basic spellcasting.

I kept saying “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry” over and over. Meanwhile, Vi kept taking deep breaths and slowly releasing them, as if trying to calm himself. Eventually, he shook his head and sighed, “Forget it.”

“It’s mostly my fault for not checking your practical ability first,” he continued, resigned to his mistake. “I made promises based on assumptions. Now I have to follow through and make good on my word.”

“Really? Oh, Vi! I’m ever so grateful!” I exclaimed, clapping my hands together.

“But in exchange, well...if you had any plans of actually *sleeping* tonight, cancel them!”

“Gladly!”

Then Vi went on to teach me just one magic technique. By the time the sky began brightening on the horizon, I’d mastered one spell.

“Vi, is it working?”

“Yes, yes, my body feels warm... You’ve pulled off an effective spell.”

“It seems I managed to make your fur much silkier, too. What a useful spell!”

Vi said it was a spell to revitalize the body. I was hoping to learn how to cast one of the more popular fire or water spells, but Vi said those could take an

entire day to learn. So he taught me this one instead.

Vi was amazingly smart, even though he was a cat. A mage's familiar was clearly a much bigger deal than I realized.

"Now try casting that same spell on yourself," he instructed, gesturing to me with his paw.

"Okay."

"The technique is the same as before. Yes, that's it. Feel the magical energy circulating throughout your entire body?"

"Yes, I feel it. My whole body feels warm!"

"Good. Now...release the magical energy. Just a drop..."

"A drop? You mean...just a little bit...?"

"Yes! That's the way! A little more...wring out just a little more..."

This was hard! So hard...

It took everything I had just to cast an effective spell, let alone learn how to adjust its voltage. Now I could see why Vi hadn't let me start with a fire or water spell. Casting a fire spell before learning how to adjust its intensity could have resulted in my entire bedroom turning into cinders.

"...Good!" he said, encouraging me. "That's about the right intensity. Now hold that output level steady."

I don't even know how long I stood there, holding steady as I kept on casting the spell.

"That's quite enough! Now stop!"

At Vi's command, I released all the energy from my body. Unthinkingly, I slumped down onto the table.

"You did it! I must admit I despaired when you said you hadn't even learned the basics of magic, but...Lady Seren! You've got the *knack*! Your powers of concentration...your endurance...it's quite remarkable!"

Vi was praising me in jubilant tones. *Phew!* I was just glad I'd managed to finish without screwing up. Vi seemed so pleased, in fact, that he raised a soft

paw and gently patted my head where it lay on the table. That really encouraged me.

“All right, let’s leave it at that for today. You did good.”

“...But I can still continue!” I protested.

I sat bolt upright in alarm. I’d no time to waste lying cheek-down on the table. I needed to make use of every minute—every *second*—in order to learn as much magic as I could!

“Don’t talk nonsense. The sun’s already starting to peek its head out. Sorry for keeping you up this long; I got too into it. If you go to bed now, you can still get a solid hour or two of sleep. Now go to bed, young lady,” he ordered. It was weird getting orders from a cat.

“It’s okay. I’m used to late nights.”

If I could grab a fifteen-minute catnap in the afternoon, I could go two days without proper sleep and feel no worse for wear. But Vi’s eyes were half-closed, like he was ready to fall asleep at any moment.

“Well, I’d like to go to bed myself,” he said with a yawn.

“Huh, I didn’t know familiars need sleep too.”

“...*Mm-hm*. At any rate, casting spells takes concentration. You should sleep so as to be fresh for tomorrow.”

I felt like I couldn’t keep arguing the point after that. And I also felt guilty for keeping Vi up this late. The little cat *did* seem very sleepy.

“I’m sorry. Thank you so much for tonight,” I said.

“Don’t mention it. I wouldn’t have promised to help if it wasn’t within my capacity.”

Vi was so cute, but he acted so...manly.

“Tomorrow, I shall come at the same hour. Open the window when I tap on the pane.”

“You’re coming tomorrow too?!” I asked in surprise.

“Mm-hm. Now, every day might be pushing it, but I’ll try to come as often as I

can,” he promised.

“Oh, I’m so happy! Oh! But Vi! Could you wait just a minute?” I cried out in alarm as Vi jumped up onto the windowsill to leave. Then I hurried over to the bedside table, where I picked up an adorably wrapped item and rushed back to Vi.

“These are...cookies!”

Vi’s ears flicked with delight. I couldn’t suppress my giggle. Vi was just like his master...he had a sweet tooth!

“Yep, cookies! Our cook bakes the most amazing ones. I was wondering if you could deliver these to Lord Viol?”

The little black cat wrapped his two front paws around the little basket of cookies. It was like he was saying: “*Leave it to me!*” It was so cute!

“I hope it’s not too big to carry. Can you fit the handle in your mouth?”

“*Guh!* Either way, I must take these cookies home...!”

It occurred to me that removing some cookies might lighten the load. But Vi seemed adamant about taking the whole batch. In the end, I suggested: “Why don’t you eat at least one of them before you go?” and Vi thought about it a second before nodding his tiny head.

I opened up the wrapping paper and removed one, which I offered to him. He accepted it in his mouth, tiny jaws clamping down, before he sat down on his haunches and set about devouring the cookie, which he held firmly in his furry front paws.

The cookie was as big around as the cat’s whole head. Nonetheless, he chowed down in clear enjoyment, a sappy look taking over his face as he savored the flavor.

“*Hee!* You’re so cute!” I squealed. “And you’re so much like Lord Viol! Familiars really *do* take after their masters, don’t they?”

It was just an offhand comment, but Vi’s eyes went large in response. After that, he hung his head and silently nibbled on his cookie. *So even familiars get shy sometimes.* I was learning so many secrets about familiars that day.

After devouring his cookie in record time, Vi brushed off his paws and got briskly to his feet. Then, looking me right in the eye, he launched into a lecture.

“Listen well, Lady Seren. From the moment you wake in the true morning, you must practice, practice, practice the technique I’ve taught you all day long.”

“...Okay!”

Can I really do this? I was abuzz with excitement.

“Now, make sure you use only the slightest amount of energy. Remember the level I had you maintain at the end there? That’s about the amount you want to be casting.”

“Okay, I understand.”

Right, right, so that’s what that was all about at the end there. Vi’s tutoring technique was gold; not a moment was wasted. *I really have bagged myself a truly excellent teacher,* I thought to myself again.

“Tomorrow, I’ll stop by the salon to see how you’re faring. Now, remember, don’t go overdoing things. That’s counterproductive.”

“Thank you, Vi. You’re a really wonderful teacher, that’s clear to me now.”

“...Hmph. But of course.”

Vi jerked his chin up in the air, all proud and haughty.

How capable he is! Capable and...adorable!



AS I walked down the palace corridor in the direction of the salon, I had to fight back a barrage of yawns. In the end, I’d only been able to sleep for an hour. It was worth the sacrifice, though.

“It’s unusual to catch you in a yawn, Lady Seren.”

I jumped, startled as someone fell into step beside me and addressed me without preamble. I looked up to see it was Riesz, Count Entartz’s second son. He was smiling brightly as he looked down at me.

“Goodness! I do apologize, Lord Riesz. I’m afraid I have not slept well as of late...”

“That’s because you work yourself much too hard. You should get some rest today.”

Riesz smiled warmly at me. *That reminds me...when Prince Helios and the other men were all mocking me in the salon, Riesz was the only one to speak up and gently rebuke them.* He was just fundamentally a nice person.

He had soft brown hair, deep gray eyes, and a plain face like mine. I enjoyed his company when propriety allowed us to interact. Somehow, just looking at him soothed me far more than the sight of the other young gentlemen and their dashing features.

“I heard from Mashlo and the others. You helped them out with the work they were late on yesterday, right? It was their own fault they slacked off and ended up with a backlog. You shouldn’t indulge them like that! You should force them to deal with the consequences of their own inaction.”

Riesz always had a pleasant smile on his face. But when it came to work, he was all business. He’d make a good bureaucrat one day, for sure.

“Speaking of which...yesterday was supposed to be your day off, wasn’t it, Lord Riesz?” I asked casually.

“I just stopped by the salon in passing. Lady Marietta was there, so I just grabbed some paperwork and headed to the reference room for refuge.”

“I see.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t Lady Marietta’s fault, but whenever she comes, Mashlo and the others get all excited, and I just can’t stomach it. You should do the same next time, Lady Seren.”

“That’s wise advice.” I smiled at Riesz. His little piece of advice was delivered so earnestly.

Lord Mashlo and the three other young gentlemen that had been in the salon yesterday were completely devoted to Marietta. It usually fell to Riesz or one of their two older peers to admonish the young men, rather than Prince Helios.

Despite that, Riesz was on very friendly terms with each of the four. I always felt he was a really well-balanced young man and I respected him a lot, even

though we were the same age.

“By the way, Lady Seren, I didn’t know you could cast magic.”

My chin jerked in surprise as Riesz dropped this unexpected statement.

“Why so shocked? Lady Seren, you’ve been casting rejuvenation magic this whole time, have you not?”

I was dumbfounded. Then I remembered something.

“Speaking of which...you’re well-versed in the magical arts yourself, aren’t you, Lord Riesz?” I turned the question back toward him.

“I wouldn’t go as far as that. But I *did* attend the Magic Academy for two years. So I probably *do* know more about magic than most of the people here.”

Yes, Riesz had been aiming to become a High Mage at one time and had even attended the Magic Academy. But at some point, I’d heard he enrolled in the Royal Academy instead.

His statement made me realize that anyone with honed magical abilities would be able to catch on to what I was doing, especially with me casting magic around the clock. In that case, I’d have to come up with some sort of clever excuse for people like him. Before I misspoke, though, I wanted to withdraw whatever useful information I could from Riesz, so I posed a question of my own.

“Is it possible to tell if someone’s casting a spell just by looking at them, then?”

“Oh, but of course. However, keeping a spell going at such a low level of intensity for an extended period of time...that’s quite the skill.”

I’d no idea it was considered “quite the skill.” It was very difficult, though, come to think of it.

“It looks like your spellcasting style still hasn’t stabilized yet, so your spell’s strength is wavering a little. But I can see how hard you’re concentrating on holding it steady. You never attended the Magic Academy, though, did you, Lady Seren...?”

“No, I just attended the Royal Academy.”

Even as I responded, I felt puzzled.

So, those in the know were apparently able to tell my casting was still amateur and that I was struggling to hold my spell steady. I sighed internally. How could I answer him if he continued to push the point? Pretending that I'd been able to use magic since way back or that I'd suddenly acquired the ability... both were lies he was sure to see through. After all, he seemed so perceptive on the subject. He could even tell I was doing my best to develop my nascent casting skills.

"...Ah."

While my mind was still whirling with potential excuses, Riesz suddenly came to a halt. He was looking straight ahead. When I looked up too, I could see Prince Helios walking this way down the corridor.

"Haha! It looks like Prince Helios has something to discuss with you, Lady Seren! I'll go on to the salon first."

"What? Lord Riesz..."

Lord Riesz slipped through the salon doors we'd just reached before I could stop him. I was relieved no more questions about my magical abilities would be forthcoming now. But at the same time, I couldn't help hanging my head.

I just couldn't look Prince Helios in the eye anymore.

"What were you two talking about?" he asked as he approached me.

"We were...talking about Lord Riesz's time at the Magic Academy."

I chose the easiest part of our conversation to offer up as an answer. Besides, that'd definitely come up, so it wasn't a lie. I reached out to push open the salon door. I just couldn't bear to talk to Prince Helios right then. Not that showing my face in the salon was any easier on me.

Yesterday, when I returned to the salon, I felt it. I couldn't stop thinking about the terrible things the others had said and I just couldn't sit still. I cursed myself for being so mentally weak.

"Ah, yes, Riesz did go to the Magic Academy, didn't he? But what does that —"

“Prince Helios, we’ve all been waiting for you.”

“There’s something we want to discuss with you.”

When I pushed open the salon door, the others all turned and looked up and immediately began speaking to Prince Helios. Distracted, he trailed off.

“...I apologize,” he demurred.

“Oh no! Please go ahead and confer with the others.”

I gave him a small smile and watched as the prince walked over to the others. He gave me a curious look as he went, clearly still interested in our conversation despite the interruption. I feigned nonchalance and pretended not to notice.

“...I’ll pour some tea.”

I headed to the bar cart, wanting to calm down. But wait...why was the atmosphere so unbearable for me, really? None of the others were acting any differently. No, they were just the same as ever. I felt alienated of my own accord. I realized that. But, at the same time, I felt like I really didn’t have a place among these people anymore.

“...!”

After serving tea to everyone and taking my own seat, I spotted a black form outside the window.

Vi had come!

We made eye contact for just a second. Then Vi immediately disappeared from sight. It was clear he wanted me to follow him. I got to my feet before I even realized what I was doing.

“Seren?”

“I’m so sorry... I just remembered I’ve some urgent business to take care of. I’ll be right back.”

That was all I said in response to Prince Helios. Attempting to appear as calm and unruffled as I could, I left the salon. Once the door closed behind me, I rushed off in a flurry of skirts. A moment later, a tiny black form came slowly floating down in front of me.

“Don’t rush. The spell will be broken. There’s no need to run; just focus on holding the spell steady. I’ll be waiting on the bench where you spoke with my master the other day.”

Then the cat turned and zoomed off.

It was true. The spell seemed prone to breaking off entirely whenever my focus slipped. It’d been happening all day. Keeping a spell going for a prolonged period of time was far, far harder than I’d ever imagined it could be.

I sighed and began to refocus. I managed to reinitiate the rejuvenation spell and then adjusted the power output.

How frustrating! Wasn’t it enough to cast the spell? Why did I have to learn how to adjust its potency? But this way probably saved a lot of magical energy. And it’d save on time, too.

I could appreciate that, but at the same time, I wasn’t even used to conjuring spells in the first place. So it vexed me to have to exert the extra time and effort adjusting things at this stage.

“...This should do it,” I said to myself.

I had adjusted the output to about the level that Vi had told me to aim for that morning. It’d probably do. I felt like the amount of time it took me to adjust the spell to the right level once I began casting it had gotten a bit shorter. No doubt because I’d been practicing all day long.

I hurried toward the bench where Lord Viol and I spoke the other day, maintaining the spell as I jogged lightly. A black cat was sitting on the bench.

He’s such a cutie! Just looking at him was enough to soothe me...

“Vi!”

I hurried over, calling his name. The cute black cat’s ears stood straight up and he watched me with an intense stare.

“*Hmm.* Yes, the spell’s quality and level are more than adequate. With results like those, no one would ever think that you’d only begun casting magic yesterday.”

“Really? Oh, I’m so pleased...!”

“You must’ve been practicing since morning. Your magical power seems to have decreased some, though.”

“I still can’t seem to produce the right level from the start. I end up putting out too much magic and wasting some.”

“You can’t expect perfection after just a day or two of training. Don’t think too far ahead. Just do your best and try to keep up the pace you’ve already achieved. Lady Seren, you’re doing far better than you yourself realize.”

“Oh, good! I’ll keep doing my best!”

I was reassured and relieved to receive such praise from Vi. At the same time, though, I wanted some extra soothing.

“Say, Vi...”

“What is it?” he asked with a little wariness to his tone.

“I was wondering if I could pet you, just a little? I feel somewhat mentally exhausted from being in the salon just now...”

As he listened to my request, Vi’s tail and ears drooped.

“*Guh...* Well... I suppose... After what happened yesterday...”

I had to lean in to listen as the little cat whispered under his breath. I noticed it yesterday when I picked him up—Vi had a tendency to stiffen up when being stroked or held. He’d mentioned that Lord Viol never really cuddled him. But it seemed he didn’t get any pets, ear scratches, or anything like that.

“All right. As a reward for practicing hard today, you may pet me.”

“Thank you, Vi!”

Delighted, I quickly scooped him up before sitting down on the bench myself. Placing the cat on my lap, I started stroking and petting his silky fur, earning a killer kitty glare from Vi.

“Y-You didn’t have to put me on your lap!” he protested.

“But this way is much more soothing for me...”

“...”

Vi piped down and let me stroke him after that. He was so kind! He didn't seem used to being handled. Or perhaps it was because he wasn't in the mood to be touched. I hoped he'd relax soon and enjoy the petting session, too. While I enjoyed the feel of his silky fur, I suddenly recalled my discussion with Riesz and decided to bring it up.

"Say, Vi, there's something I'm curious about..."

"What is it? Speak."

"Earlier, I was talking to one of Prince Helios's school friends at the salon, and he noticed the spell I was casting."

"*Oho?* Indeed?" Vi lifted his head and looked at me in interest.

"He noticed that I was casting a rejuvenation spell and also noticed I was attempting to stabilize it."

Vi's eyes narrowed as he listened, and his tail curled up in pleasure.

"...A sharp eye, to be sure. So, who *is* this perceptive person?"

I hesitated a second. Was it all right for me to say...?

But what harm could come from identifying Riesz as the one who'd noticed my new magical prowess? Vi himself had just praised him, calling him "perceptive," after all.

Even if Vi reported back to Lord Viol, well...what of it? Perhaps it'd even do good things for Riesz's future, if his name was known to the Archmage of the Third Royal Mage Guild.

After thinking it over, I spoke.

"His name is Riesz; he's the second son of a count. He attended the Magic Academy for two years."

"I see. Well, what a waste of talent. He sounds gifted."

"I was worried that everyone who's studied magic would be able to tell what I'm up to, just based on how Riesz reacted to me. Wouldn't it be better for me to hide the fact I can suddenly use magic now? And also hide the reason why I'm practicing sustained spellcasting...?"

“No. Not everyone will be able to tell that you’re casting magic. Can you, Lady Seren, tell when I am casting spells or tell the quality of my magic just by looking at me?”

“No...I certainly can’t.”

I’d only just learned from Vi’s training about how to circulate magical energy within my body, release it as a spell, and adjust its output strength. But even with that knowledge, I couldn’t tell just by looking at someone whether they were circulating magical energy or not.

“Perception is another skill unto itself. We had a class on it at the Magic Academy. It doesn’t matter if you can’t perceive it, but if you could do so, as this Riesz does, it’d come in handy for picking up on magical beast attacks and so on.”

“Yes, I’m sure it would.”

“That’s why it’s taught in class, but few can perceive it down to the minutest detail. Most that do would go on to become good mages with enough training, I’d wager.”

“But some might not?”

“It depends on their natural ability, magical power level, and aptitude. It’s a combination of things, you know.”

“I see...”

So perhaps Riesz had left the path of becoming a future High Mage because he was lacking one of those key aspects. I’d no idea what the reason for him switching career paths might have been, but I had to admit I was curious. Still, there were more important things to focus on.

“So you’re saying that anyone who went to the Magic Academy might be able to tell I’m casting magic, not just Riesz? Even if it’s not to the same degree as him?”

“Indeed. So...have you thought up a convincing cover story?”

“Well, I was thinking of saying that I was recently taught rejuvenation magic for my fainting spells. I’m often dizzy from insomnia and sleepless nights, you

see.”

I offered up the cover story I’d been thinking of giving Riesz earlier. Vi thought it over for a few moments before nodding slightly.

“Hmm, it’s a bit awkward...but I suppose it more or less explains why you’d be casting such a spell for sustained periods of time.”

“I guess it’s not really a very good cover story, is it?”

“Often, those who cast continuous spells suffer exhaustion, and some even use up all their magical power and end up fainting, you see.”

“Really?”

“I came by to check on you around this time today to make sure you weren’t in danger of exhausting your magical energy stores. We can’t have you fainting in public.”

I’d no idea. Wow...I’d really been up to some risky business, all without even realizing.

“It’s a training method used by those blessed with abundant magical power who want to increase their mastery of spellcasting. It’s highly effective. But, as you can see from trying it yourself, it can be quite grueling. The method was not much liked by the students at the Magic Academy... Ah, but wait, I think I already mentioned that.”

“*Hmm...*now you mention it, I do recall hearing you say that.”

The magical world was clearly deep and complex.

“However, perhaps you can get away with saying that you thought continuously casting a spell is a good way to ensure it’s more effective. Nonmagic people won’t understand either way, and those who do will just write it off as an amateur’s mistake.”

The self-satisfied look on Vi’s little cat face made me burst out laughing. All of a sudden, I felt my spirits lifting.

“You’re right. If anyone asks, can I just say that Lord Vi—that your master taught me the spell?”

Yikes, yikes! I felt like it wouldn't be wise to mention Lord Viol's name in public, so I quickly corrected myself. Vi seemed to understand. He opened one eye and snorted before closing both eyes again.

"That should be fine. Surely no one would want my—my master's head on the chopping block, simply for showing consideration for a duke's daughter's fragile health."

"I mean, the chopping block isn't really a thing people have to worry about these days."

"Maybe not for you. For me, it's a constant concern."

I couldn't help giggling at that. But Vi shot me an expression of utter seriousness. Really, though, there was no need for him to worry. I knew about those things. I'd undergone extensive training to become the next queen, after all.

Our kingdom is ruled by a monarchy, but anyone can become a civil official, knight, or mage, even if they are common-born. What's more, people are free to marry for love. Only those with the fate of the kingdom on their shoulders, such as the prince, are subject to arranged marriages.

"I don't care how peaceful this country is, I'll still have my status stripped from me if I screw up," Vi said.

Vi seemed to think it was still a threat, but no one had actually been beheaded for centuries now. And, as far as I knew, no one had ever been stripped of their position or status, either. *Well, not without very good reason...*

"Well, I'll mention your master's name only to the extent it doesn't cause any trouble for him."

"Do as you like. More importantly...can we wrap this up already?"

"*Hmm?* Wrap what up?" I asked, cocking my head.

"If you're sufficiently soothed, then might I suggest you return to what you were doing?"

"Oh, right. I do have to get back."

My heart weighed heavy. But I'd been entrusted with several tasks. Around

this time, everyone was no doubt engaged in discussing the meeting agenda. I needed to go and work hard too.

“But one more thing first... Um, I’ve been thinking of studying using the magical reference books in the materials room whenever I can find a spare moment. Do you have any recommendations for texts I should read, Vi? Or if you don’t, could you maybe ask your master for me?”

I wasn’t sure if cats read books. Or if familiars read books. My question came out sounding so awkward. But Vi answered me solemnly.

“For texts available in the materials room, I recommend *Elementary Magic in History and in Practice* as well as *Elementary Magic for Beginners: An Illustrated Guide*. Also, based on your magical power, you should look up texts on wind magic.”

“I’m a wind magic type?” I asked.

“Your wind magic is strongest right now. Focus on honing that, and it’ll open the door to the next elemental magic for you.”

“Thank you, Vi. I’ll go and take out a bunch of books and study hard starting today!”

“Well, don’t overdo it. If you don’t take time to rest, you’ll just become ineffective and useless.”

“I’ll be very careful!”

I didn’t really understand the part where Vi talked about “opening the door to the next elemental magic,” but I was sure that if I read the books he’d recommended, I’d figure it out myself.

Determined to work hard, I got up from the bench, releasing Vi from my grasp at the same time. Vi slid smoothly off my lap, landed on all four feet, then stretched himself out. I was sure my affections had been an imposition upon him. I felt a little bit guilty.

“Thank you, Vi. Thanks to you, I feel much more cheerful now.”

“...*Hmph*. Thank me by showing results. Now go.”

Vi stuck his nose in the air and turned his back to me. But his ears were

flicking back and forth, so I knew he was still monitoring my presence. His personality really *was* so adorable.

“I’m so happy you were sent to me, Vi. Please thank your master for me!”

With that, I turned and hurried back toward the salon. I was feeling so much happier now than just mere minutes before when I’d scuttled away from its stifling atmosphere.

After all, I had Vi in my corner, going all-out to help me. What else could I do to ensure I was doing everything I could on my end? I thought it over very carefully as I hurried back.

Viol 2

The Most Effective Teaching Method

AFTER I saw Lady Seren off, I checked my surroundings to ensure no one else was around. Then I dissolved my cat spell. I needed to get back to my quarters at once. Otherwise, my assistant, Contard, would be beside himself. I sighed, recalling how frazzled he'd acted only yesterday.

He'd only been my assistant for one month but had become more and more of a scaredy-cat as time passed. I didn't want to cause him any further mental strain. That said, I had no more meetings today and told him I was "heading out for some fresh air." There were no more pressing matters I'd needed to sign off on. There were certain magical inventions underway, of course, but nothing with a strict time limit. When I thought about it, there was probably nothing that would cause Contard to search for me.

I felt a little relieved, but my mind now turned to thoughts of the conversation I'd just exchanged with Lady Seren.

She'd asked for magic book recommendations. She said she was going to the materials room to look for some, so I recommended a few titles. *I should lend her some from my personal library...especially the texts I found most useful when I was a student*, I thought. *I own many that are quite easy to understand. Yes...I should lend those to her.*

I was still thinking about it when I returned to the mage quarters. I could see a slight figure coming from the opposite direction. It had curly hair. Could it be Contard? It looked quite like him.

"Archmage Viol!" he shouted.

"What is it, Contard?" I asked. "Has something happened?"

"No, nothing's happened. Only..."

Contard looked out of breath. He must've been running this way and that, looking for me. But why would he have been looking for me?

"If there's nothing pressing, then drop it. You should really learn to take a break now and then."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly! In fact, *you* take a break, please, Archmage Viol. Why,

you staggered and almost fell this morn!”

“That was caused by a simple lack of sleep,” I stated blandly.

“*Eek!* I do apologize! I have overstepped my bounds...!”

I frowned. I hadn’t realized he’d seen that this morning. At the sight of my frown, the slim man trembled even more violently. *My bad, Contard. But you really should get a handle on your anxiety. It can’t be good for your blood pressure.*

But perhaps he’d come in search of me out of concern for my health?

“B-But even so,” he went on, “you really should rest today. You have barrier protection duty the day after tomorrow, so you must bolster your health, or it could affect your work!”

I was mildly impressed. Contard was speaking his mind despite the terrible green hue on his face. He *had* a backbone, then. Besides, there was truth in what he was saying.

Magic Barrier duty is one of the most important duties of the High Mages and the Archmages who oversee them. We take shifts maintaining the protective barrier. The shifts are long, too—a single shift usually lasts at least twelve hours.

Several mages are always on duty maintaining the barrier at all times. But during a personnel shift, there is a temporary gap in the barrier. It’s also set up so that only those directly involved know the exact timing of those shifts.

Not only are shifts long, but we must maintain total concentration during the entire process of sustaining the magical barrier. Accordingly, perfect health is expected of every High Mage on duty.

“Yes, yes, you’re quite right, Contard. I’ll rest a little,” I conceded.

“...Thank you, sir!”

Contard smiled, looking relieved. He must’ve been afraid to offer his own opinion. But really, there was no need for such trembling. Nor the tears, either.

I took Contard up on his suggestion and retired to my chambers in the mage quarters. Alone, I pondered.

All things considered, I was exhausted. I couldn't continue to give so much of my time to Lady Seren, that much was obvious. But I'd made a promise, and I was determined to do all I could to at least get her to a point where she had a shot at passing the exam.

We'd only known each other a day, but I fully understood her determination. And she had the raw aptitude for a High Mage; her ability to concentrate for prolonged periods was remarkable.

She'd said herself that she was "practically an expert...at doing tedious and boring tasks from sunup to sunset." Indeed, she did seem to have the endurance of someone who was used to undertaking strenuous training since childhood.

Nor was she the type to sit around awaiting instruction. No, she was determined to plug every spare moment with self-study. It'd be such a waste to let talent like hers go undeveloped. If she could indeed become a High Mage, then we would gain a powerful ally.

I needed to think of the most effective, most efficient means of tutelage to get her where she had to be.

Alone in my quarters, I headed straight to my bedchamber. In the moments before I fell asleep, I went over the things I'd need to tell her first when I visited her that night.



A little before the stroke of nine, I transformed into a cat and hurried to Lady Seren's manor.

Being unable to drink properly as a cat last night, despite extreme thirst, had vexed me. As a result, I was now running late, since I'd distracted myself by practicing the technique. *Good grief, what was I thinking?* The bell tolled as I was bounding through the streets. I needed to hurry.

I located the correct window then began to leap and jump my way up the wall, using the stonework as footholds. As a cat, I was light, and my body could move in ways that'd be unfathomable to my human form.

Tonight, as I arrived at the closed window, Lady Seren was already there

waiting to open it.

“Vi! I’ve been waiting and waiting!”

With a huge smile, she plucked me off the window’s ledge. Then she proceeded to wipe off my paws, as she had yesterday. Only this time, she used a cloth that seemed to have been earmarked for this duty in particular. No fancy handkerchief this time, which was a relief.

Upon the table, I saw several magical texts and scattered sheets of paper upon which she had made copious notes. It appeared she’d indeed been engaging in self-study, just as she’d said she would.

“There! Now your paws are all clean. You can move as you like now.”

Finishing up my feet, Seren nodded in approval. As I felt her grip loosen, I slipped from her arms. Landing lightly on the tabletop, I stretched. Lady Seren watched me with a smile on her face. I looked right back at her.

Hmm. Yes, I could see the faint green glow enveloping her entire form. It was of an even thickness all around and was in constant, encircling motion. It was very good. Very precise.

“Your rejuvenation magic is beautifully done. Much better than when last we met,” I said.

“I think I’ve been getting the hang of it, bit by bit. Also, I’m feeling very calm right now.”

“The end goal is for you to be able to cast this spell steadily, without wavering, even if you’re going through mental upheaval or turmoil. But at any rate, you’ve done well so far.”

“Thank you so much!”

Her joy made my heart glow too, just a little. I, too, had walked this path, after all. I could well understand the grueling process.

For her to have reached a point where she could cast such a steady spell despite only learning it this morning...she must’ve spent the entire day casting it, then recasting each time her magical energy was exhausted, always fine-tuning and adjusting, until she had it just right.

Her royal instructors had heavily praised her and I could see why. She was, indeed, a diligent student.

“Judging from our first day, I’ve no complaints about your technique or attitude toward learning. I thought that getting you ready for the High Mage’s exam in just three months was lunacy, but if you keep up this pace, you might even be able to actually pass it.”

“Oh, I’m so glad...”

“‘*Might*’ being the operative word here,” I stressed. “It’s an extremely difficult examination; usually, you wouldn’t have even a hope of passing it.”

Some years not a single hopeful managed to pass the exam after all. Sometimes, we just didn’t have the numbers we needed, which was why an Archmage guild leader like myself still had barrier duty.

“Incidentally, why are you so desperate to pass *this* year’s exam in particular?” I asked. “It’ll be held again next year. Wouldn’t it be better to take things slowly and prepare for that one instead?”

That would certainly make my job as a tutor less grueling. With a little more time, I could potentially manage to locate a tutor who’d be more suited to the job for her. But she shook her head.

“This year is my first and last chance at this.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“In about six months from now, I’m going to turn eighteen. Then, another six months later, Prince Helios will have his eighteenth birthday. Once we’re both of age, I’m quite certain our engagement will be announced domestically and internationally, and then a solid marriage date will be set.”

Once that happened, her fate would be sealed, she went on to say, with no small amount of emotion in her voice.

So presumably, if she failed the exam this year, then no matter how she felt about it inside, she’d go through with the wedding ceremony and become Prince Helios’s queen. Then she’d begin participating in state politics, as if that’d been her intention all along.

The thought of it...made my claws extend with anger.

“Marietta is two years younger than me. If she starts her royal training now, I know she will pick things up quick. If I could delay the engagement announcement until Marietta comes of age, it’d give me so many more options.”

Which was why she wanted to pass the High Mage’s exam this year, she continued, smiling.

I wasn’t sure how to feel. *Doesn’t this bother you at all?* I wanted to ask.

Giving up her seat for her younger sister...will she truly feel no regrets?

It angered me to think of Lady Seren shouldering queen responsibilities while, all the while, her husband and his cronies would be mocking her behind her back. However, if she did manage to become a High Mage, that’d mean that all her years of training and the personal connections she’d made...would all be ultimately useless.

High Mages spend their time cloistered in the mage quarters. It’s not the kind of job that involves diplomacy, foreign trade, people-pleasing interactions, banquets, or balls of any kind. Furthermore, if she *did* manage to become a High Mage, she’d be duty-bound to protect the country. And withdrawing from the post would be difficult indeed. It’d be too late for regrets once she assumed the role.

However, she’d only just decided to start aiming for the High Mage job. It was obvious what her answer would be, even before I asked.

And yet people often change their minds.

Once she calmed down a little and was able to make rational decisions once more, then I should probably ask her again how she *really* felt about all this. Having made up my mind, I lifted my head to look at her.

After all, who knew what would transpire in the future? Right now, all I had to do was provide the best possible teaching in order to increase her chances of passing the High Mage examination.

“All right. Then let us decide on a schedule that will take you from today up

until the day of the exam in three months.”

“Okay!”

“What we’ll carry out today will be simple enough, but Lady Seren...what time do you rise in the morning?”

“At seven o’clock.”

“Then you must be in bed eight hours before that.”

“What?! I don’t need *that* much sleep, really! And I still have so many books I want to read...”

“But not simply to sleep. You must lie in a dead faint.”

“A...dead faint?”

Lady Seren’s eyes grew wide. Ah yes, but this was a very effective method.

“When you exhaust your magical energy and fall into a dead faint, it actually increases your magical reserves. But only slightly. Still, if repeated over many days, it all adds up considerably. I— My master still uses the technique to this day.”

“So, in other words, you want me to use up all my magic before bedtime in the hopes of increasing my magical capacity...?”

“Precisely. My master has tested the technique on his own body, and he’s found that even fully depleted magic regenerates itself after around eight hours of a dead faint. So be reassured and lay comatose.”

“Be reassured and...and lay *comatose*? *Hehe*, all right then. I’ll give it my best shot.”

I was unsure why she was laughing. *I said it to reassure her. But no matter.*

“It *must* be at least eight hours, as you won’t wake before that amount of time has elapsed. If you don’t wake, your maids will be terribly concerned, no doubt. If you cannot guarantee an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep, then I suggest not attempting to exhaust your magic at all,” I warned. “Please bear that in mind.”

“Oh, my! It’d be terrible if they ended up calling the doctor for me or

something. What a fuss that would be.”

Where’s the clock? Ah, over there. We don’t have much time tonight, either. Let us keep our conversation short, then.

Lady Seren lifted her head to follow my eyeline. Then she looked puzzled.

“Vi, did you just glance at the clock?”

“Yes. We don’t have much time.”

“Oh! You can even tell time. Perhaps I should just think of you as a human altogether.”

“I would prefer that.”

I would *overwhelmingly* prefer that. I feared I was warping her perception of familiars, but few mages even had one, to begin with.

“Lady Seren, I’m going to ask you to continue today’s training regimen for the next week.”

“So you just want me to practice controlling my rejuvenation spell output from when I wake till I sleep, right? And then, before I go to bed, I’m to exhaust my magical stocks completely. ...Is that correct?”

“Nothing good ever comes from overdoing things from day one, after all. First, get your body accustomed to casting magic. Then I will teach you offensive spells.”

“Okay.”

Lady Seren knew when to take instruction. This was helpful. No doubt she understood the importance of listening to an instructor’s words, as long as they came from a place of greater knowledge than she herself possessed.

“Next, there’s something else I’d like you to do over the next three months until the examination.”

“Yes?”

Lady Seren nodded at me, an earnest look in her eyes. I realized she was clutching a notebook, which I hadn’t even noticed her picking up.

“This year’s examination is to be held on the seventh day of the month of

Flameber.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“However, the entry cutoff is the twelfth of Breezeber. That is only just two months away.”

“So that means I have...uh...only sixty-eight days?! I didn’t know that!”

“Because it’s not announced publicly. This information is known only within the Magic Academy.”

Lady Seren looked pale. Perhaps she’d realized the gravity of the situation for the first time.

“In your case, you already have enough magical power and aptitude to qualify for the exam. The problem is your practical magic ranking. It must be higher than a B.”

“So, if I understand it right, I need to be able to subjugate a magical beast?”

“Indeed. They look at your magical precision, your dexterity, and your entire battle form while subjugating a mid-level magic beast. Generally, the battle data is submitted in the form of a recording orb by the competitor themselves.”

“So that means I can take as many shots at it as I want.”

“Yes. You can defeat a succession of beasts and submit the recording of your best performance. That’s the way everyone does it.”

But unfortunately, she didn’t have as many chances at this as she seemed to think, at least compared to her competition. Magic Academy students are able to enter the labyrinth during class, and some even pick up part-time jobs in magic beast suppression.

In her case, however, she needed to learn offensive and defensive magic first and start off by subjugating several low-ranking magic beasts. Then and only then could she take on the mid-level enemies. And she’d have to do it all behind closed doors, in utmost secrecy.

“It’ll be difficult, in your case, to actually go out and practice subjugating. You have your royal training and your work in the salon. It’ll be difficult for you to find time alone during the day, won’t it?”

“But even so, I have to...”

Lady Seren fell silent for a few moments. Then she nodded as if she had made up her mind about something and even smiled a little.

“I’ll fix things so that the time I’d usually spend in royal training, I can have off instead.”

“...Is such a thing even possible?!”

I was so shocked that I ended up raising my voice.

What a scandal it’d cause for a man’s voice to be heard ringing out in a lady’s chambers! I clapped a paw over my mouth, an unintentionally human gesture that I immediately cursed myself for.

My ears and tail drooped, ashamed of my slipup.

“Hehe, don’t worry! I’m sure I’ll be able to do it.”

Ah, Lady Seren’s earlier manner of speech has returned.

Once our actual session began, her choice of words became much more proper. No doubt an unconscious display of respect toward a tutor imparting knowledge. She was most informal with me the rest of the time, though. Probably because I looked like a cat.

“I’ve been told I’ve learned so much during my princess consort studies that there’s nothing left for me to learn. If I ask for time to study independently from now on, I’m pretty sure they’ll grant it to me.”

Lady Seren reached out and began to stroke my back, no doubt mistaking my flattened ears and tail for an invitation. Her petting sessions *had* felt rather good recently, but I’d rather convince myself it was all in my head.

“Well, I only hope it’ll be that simple...” I said.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m actually pretty good at getting what I want, you know.”

Lady Seren gave me a boastful grin that took me by surprise.

Who knows, maybe she *would* get permission. From what I’d heard, she was highly esteemed by her tutors and the king and queen alike. At any rate, this

matter was one entirely in her hands alone. I'd wait and see how she handled it.

"Then I shall leave that to you."

"Yep, you can count on me. Only..."

"Only?"

"The entry cutoff is so much sooner than I realized. I'm worried about...the subjugating. Right now, I'm having a hard time even working on rejuvenation magic. I don't have much stamina, to begin with, much less in terms of magic. I've never done much exercise...only dance, I guess. Does one learn to wield a sword and do martial arts and all that at the Magic Academy?"

Lady Seren really did seem concerned. But, in fact, sword-fighting and combat arts weren't really taught at the Magic Academy. That sort of thing was the knights' domain. Still, I couldn't expect her to know anything about the ins and outs of the Magic Academy, an institution she'd never personally attended.

"There's no need for swordplay or physical training. I'm going to train you to be able to defeat an enemy using magic alone. So I'm going to have you learn to pull off long-range and close-range magical attacks in as short a timeframe as possible."

"...I'll do my very best!"

She balled up both fists and held them up to her chest, a comical sight. I had the feeling she was capable. The only question was whether she could channel that determination into an effective attack against a magical beast.

"Then we'll work on magical barriers."

"Magical barriers?"

"Yes. Like a shield made of magic to protect you in battle. The most advanced form of it is what we use to maintain the magical protective barrier around the kingdom, you know. This all ties back into the skills I'm teaching you right now—casting the rejuvenation spell in an ongoing fashion. It will serve you well in the future, also."

"Oh, so it can be used like that as well! Not a moment's being wasted!" Lady Seren raised her voice in excitement, hands pressed to her cheeks.

Of course. I never waste a single second. I smiled to myself. *Yes, I am an effective teacher, after all.*

Mages generally lack physical strength and stamina. We lack even the physical ability needed to evade the attacks of a magical beast. Even armor and a shield won't help much. This is why we protect ourselves with shields and armor made of magic.

We've honed this art over millennia. Why, we now even have the magical technology to maintain barrier walls for protection over many hours. What puny shield or clanking armor worn by a knight could ever compete with that?

"If you've got a strong magical barrier around you, then you should be able to fell a magical beast without suffering injuries from its attacks," I said. "It takes a long time, mind you."

She had what it took to qualify for the exam. But to actually pass it, she'd need much more instruction. First though, she needed to qualify. At the moment, I needed to have her focus on learning the necessary techniques for felling a magical beast.

"Um, so I realize now how short time is," she said. "So could you maybe start teaching me a new magic technique today...?"

"I thought you'd say that. The answer is no. Also, I must forbid you from trying to learn ahead on your own."

I brushed off Lady Seren's request, trying to be as firm as possible. She could pout, but it'd do her no good. On this, I would not budge.

"But..."

"No, it's too dangerous. And I don't have time to correct any bad habits you pick up from trying to do things on your own. Do we have time to waste on things like that, *hmm?*"

"No..."

"I cannot come here tomorrow night nor the night after. But the night after that, I will teach you a new technique. I promise."

"...All right."

She seemed to understand but still looked troubled. Still, the situation was what it was. There was so much for her to learn in just two short months, after all.

“Lady Seren, until then, I want you to focus hard on that rejuvenation spell. Focus on holding it steady, endurance, and adjusting the output to the correct level. The results will help you when learning future techniques and could be the deciding factor that helps you pass the examination.”

“...Okay!”

Lady Seren’s eyes sparkled with determination. She seemed to have pulled herself together and made up her mind to focus on the rejuvenation spell. *Hmm. Good.*

I walked over to Lady Seren and placed a black paw on her white forearm.

“Lady Seren, I shall show you the way. Simply trust in me and do as I say.”

Lady Seren’s eyes widened for a moment. Then she smiled, and it was like flowers coming into bloom.

“Thank you, Vi! I’ll trust in you with all my heart!”

Hmm. Good.

Yes, it was good...but why was she suddenly petting me so vigorously? It tickled something awful. But Lady Seren seemed so happy, I was loath to stop her.

I tried to signal my displeasure by slapping the table with my tail, but Lady Seren was oblivious and picked me up instead. I raised my voice in protest.

“Lady Seren! I am tired from too much talking. May I have some water?”

“Oh, of course! Oh yes! I prepared the cutest little dish for you! I hope you like it!”

Excitedly, Lady Seren produced a dish for me. It was white, with a dainty rose pattern. Just from one glance, I could tell it was expensive.

This kind of dish for a cat...? The excess of aristocrats is always mind-boggling...

I was afraid to even touch it. But I'd also spent a lot of time practicing lapping up water like a proper cat, even going so far as observing the neighborhood strays to see how they did it. This was my chance to put into practice all that I had learned.

Careful not to accidentally dip my front paws in the dish, I slowly leaned down and began to lap the water with my tongue, making sure to flick the liquid to the back of my throat for swallowing.

"You're so dainty! I knew a white dish would be best. It offsets your black fur so perfectly!" she exclaimed in a singsong voice.

Never mind that! Notice how catlike I am!

"Is it tasty?"

"Mmn."

Well, it's just water...

"I know! I saved some cheesecake from dinner. Do you like cheesecake?"

"Obviously. I like it second-best to apple pie."

"I guess that means you love it then, huh? Here you go!"

Humming to herself, Lady Seren scooped the cream cheese part of the cheesecake onto a spoon and held it out to me.

Despite my excellent drinking demonstration, it'd certainly be easier to eat the cheesecake like this rather than trying to lick it off a dish. I gobbled the cream cheese off the spoon in clear enjoyment, which seemed to satisfy Lady Seren very much.

"You know, I noticed this yesterday, too. You really eat well by hand, don't you, Vi? Does Lord Viol feed you like this sometimes, too?"

Lady Seren seemed tickled by the prospect, but it sounded silly to me. Obviously, I hadn't been spoonfed by someone since I was a wee lad.

And she hadn't even praised my drinking skills that much.

I convinced myself it was only because my drinking skills were so effortlessly catlike...

Seren 3

I Trust You

“I shall show you the way. Simply trust in me and do as I say.”

My eyes widened as I stared at the little black cat who’d just delivered those rousing words.

He was so solemn. Yet so cute.

It was like a tiny gentleman was swearing fealty to me. I felt like giggling, my soul feeling warm and fuzzy inside.

Right. With Vi in my corner, I knew I could endure, no matter how hard the training process might be.

“Thank you, Vi!” I exclaimed. “I’ll trust in you with all my heart!”

The black cat made a satisfied expression and nodded. He looked so confident and sweet that I couldn’t stop myself from petting his fluffy back.

I offered cheesecake as penance, and he ate it up with his usual expression of delight.

Hehe. Vi seemed to be enjoying that cheesecake so much, he looked like he was about to melt. He looked like he was about to unleash an adorable “Mew!” of delight. But instead, he kept on eating in silence.

That was terribly cute as well. But I wondered if he’d ever meow like a normal cat and approach me for pets. Oh, but Vi’s voice really resembled Lord Viol’s. So, even if Vi did meow, no doubt it’d sound dignified and manly.

Hmm? Vi was having trouble licking off the cheesecake stuck all around his mouth. *I’m sure he wouldn’t like it very much if I wiped it off with my hand.* Chuckling, I wiped his mouth off with a dampened handkerchief, which he fussed over at first, but soon settled down and let me do it.

Ah, his presence is so soothing! I knew I’d be sleeping well again tonight.

Vi seemed to not have enjoyed the face-wiping. He curled up into a ball on the table, ears flattened. As I watched him, I remembered something important.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I wanted to discuss something with you, Vi.”

“Hmm. What is it?”

“How should I repay you for your tutoring?”

“I don’t really need payment. You gave me those tasty cookies yesterday, after all. I really liked those.”

“No, no, that won’t do. I’m incredibly grateful that I was introduced to an amazing tutor like you.”

“I... I see. I am pleased to have provided satisfactory instruction.”

Vi looked away, embarrassed. His tail continued to flop happily back and forth on the table. He was so cute, I couldn’t stop myself—I had to pet his little head.

“I was planning to discuss payment with the tutor as soon as we were introduced. But you were just so cute, I completely forgot all about it,” I said.

I felt terrible about it. I should’ve discussed payment before we agreed to work together. I may be ignorant about some things, but even I know how these things work. Vi was Lord Viol’s familiar, so perhaps he didn’t know much about the concept of compensation either. But the same couldn’t be said for Lord Viol.

“Perhaps we should discuss it again once you’ve passed the exam,” Vi suggested, folding his paws in front of himself.

“It’s got nothing to do with the end result,” I insisted. “Tutoring me is taking up lots of your time and energy, right? I’m not sure if I can prepare anything of equal value, but I would like to...”

“All right, all right. I’ll consult with my master.”

I breathed a sigh of relief once I had Vi’s promise on this.

Speaking of Lord Viol, I’d often heard he was incredibly busy as the Archmage of the Third Royal Mage Guild. Despite that, he went out of his way to send his familiar to me. I owed him a debt of thanks. The things I could provide in return for someone like Lord Viol were surely limited in scope. But I wanted to do something to repay his kindness.

“Well, for today, I’ve taught you all I came to teach. I shall return home and sleep now.”

“Oh, yes. And it’s time for me to become ‘comatose,’ as you said,” I laughed.

“Once I’ve left through the window, make sure to lock it and then get right to bed. Then you must cast rejuvenation magic on yourself in such a way as to deplete your energy completely. I believe this’ll be your first time attempting such a thing, so I shall observe you just today and leave after.”

“All right.”

Goodness, he was so fastidious. He was clearly a stickler for details, just like my maid, Rince. I was so grateful to Lord Viol for sending me such a diligent and thorough cat.

I went over to the window to see off Vi, who’d leaped up onto the windowsill. He looked up at me, head tilted to one side as if he’d something else to say.

“What is it?”

“Ah. It’s just... I said I wouldn’t come tomorrow or the day after...”

“Right.”

“But could you meet me tomorrow? The same time as today, on the same bench?”

“Oh, sure. That won’t be a problem.”

“All right. I’ll be waiting, then. Now, close the window and go straight to bed.”

I left the cat watching me solemnly from outside the window as I went over to the bed, just as I was told. As I lay there increasing my magical energy output, my body suddenly went cold all over.

...Is this what it means to exhaust your magical power?

I was worried all of a sudden, but when I looked over at the window, I could see the little black cat peering in at me, his fur illumined in the moonlight. Just the sight of him sitting there made me feel immediately at ease again.

As long as Vi was watching me, I’d nothing to fear.

My mind was spinning as if I was suffering a dizzy spell and my body felt ice cold. I still felt a little anxious, but I’d no time to think about it. As I expended the last reserves of my magical power, darkness rose up and swallowed me.



THE next day, I awoke feeling more refreshed than I'd ever felt. After classes at the academy, I successfully lobbied the palace to be able to use my princess consort training time for self-study instead.

Perhaps because I'd gone all out on the rejuvenation spell, my body felt light as a feather and my mind as sharp as a tack. I felt like I could absorb twice as much information today. I headed straight to the royal archives at the palace to study.

I was engrossed in the latest books on magical theory when I was interrupted.

"Seren?"

It was a voice I wasn't expecting to hear. I stiffened for a moment.

"Good, I'm glad I found you here."

"Your Highness..."

What are you doing here? The words got stuck in my throat and I swallowed them back down. Prince Helios usually went straight to the salon. I never dreamed I'd run into him here. Honestly, I was very shocked.

So shocked, it obviously showed on my face. But, even so, what was making *him* frown this way? He was the one who'd surprised *me* after all.

"Is there something...I can help you with?" I asked a little awkwardly.

"No, I... Seren, why've you started calling me 'Your Highness' these days? Has something changed? You just started doing that out of the blue."

"It occurred to me to imitate how others address you." I kept calm and answered smoothly. "I noticed it during one of the salon sessions. I'm the only one who addresses you in a different way from the rest. We may be childhood friends, but I'm almost an adult. This felt more appropriate."

This answer, by design, would be the most difficult to refute.

In truth, however, changing the way I addressed Prince Helios was merely the first step of my plan. My plan to transition into being nothing more than another one of his subjects. Once I managed to become a High Mage, I could no

longer get away with calling him just Helios. So I figured I'd start now so that no one would notice the change later on.

"That's nothing you need to bother with, though, you know? You're to be my wife in the not-too-distant future, Seren."

"At that time, I shall dispense with the formalities and return to calling you Helios."

As I answered, I gave him a sparkling grin, and he grinned back, brows quirking upward.

"All right, all right. As you wish, Seren."

He wouldn't force me. That wasn't in his nature.

"By the way, I heard you're to be freed from your princess consort training for a while," he said.

"Oh my! Well, the matter was only just brought up today. I'm surprised that you've heard already."

News really does travel fast. I was taken aback.

"I had something I wanted to speak to you about, but it didn't seem like you were coming to the salon today, so I sought you out instead," he said.

"I've been given permission to use the time I'd usually spend in princess consort training doing self-study instead," I explained. "There's actually a great deal I'd like to learn about in order to broaden my horizons..."

By this, I meant to imply that I would no longer be attending the salon sessions as before. After all, time was a luxury I didn't have.

"...But more importantly, what was it you wanted to speak to me about that was so pressing you sought me out yourself?" I asked.

Prince Helios searching the palace for me...now, that was an unusual circumstance. Often, we just ran into each other at the salon. He had never come to the archives looking for me before.

"Ah. About that. I've heard a performing troupe will come to the capital soon."

“Oh yes, I heard that too. The costumes and the production values are said to be stunning, the whole performance like something from a dream, they say,” I said with a smile.

“Yes, yes, right!” he enthused. “So...since it’s such a rare opportunity, I was hoping you’d like to go and see it together?”

My breath caught in my throat.

“It just occurred to me that you and I have never really gone out together, have we? If you’re taking a break from princess consort training, then...presumably, you can make a little time in your schedule, can’t you?”

For a moment, my heart swelled with joy. But just for a moment. Then it was swallowed up by a dark wave of sadness. I had difficulty suppressing the swell of emotion. I feared that tears might be shed at any moment. I looked down in a panic, blinking rapidly to try to convince the tears to return to the ducts from whence they came.

Why now?

Prince Helios was right. We’d barely ever appeared in public together. We met daily, but that was only ever at the academy or the salon or at banquets. All places where we were expected to be together.

If he’d spoken these words to me only a few days earlier, how delighted I would’ve been! I would’ve been half-choked with excitement over getting all dressed up to the nines and enjoying a splendid date with my future husband...!

But not now.

“Marietta...” I choked out.

“What?”

No doubt he’d much rather have taken Marietta. But he was obliged to ask me because of his duty and standing, and the thought of it made me feel so wretched I could hardly stand it.

I pictured Prince Helios and Marietta out on the town, enjoying the performance together. Even in my mind, they made such a stunning couple that I felt like all the wind had been knocked out of me.

Everyone was right about everything they'd said. How come I hadn't been able to see it before? How could such a drab girl like myself appear by the dashing prince's side in such a dreamlike, gorgeous setting?

"I'm...I'm busy with my research," I stuttered. "But Marietta has been saying how she's just *dying* to see the performance. Why don't you invite her, instead? I'm sure she'd be delighted."

"Don't be ridiculous. I can't go with her."

Prince Helios frowned, and I realized I had spoken out of turn.

"Even if she *is* my fiancée's little sister, I can't be seen escorting Marietta. Think about all the loose tongues that'd wag at a sight like that."

"Y-Yes, of course. Just as you say. I do apologize. I simply spoke without thinking, remembering how much Marietta seems keen to go. It was a silly thought, rashly voiced."

Obviously, I'd made a stupid choice saying something like that. Until our engagement was officially ended, being seen together would bring nothing but cold looks and disapproval toward both Prince Helios and Marietta.

"When would be good?" he asked.

"Er..."

"You're busy now, right? Then when works best for you?" he pressed.

His question was worded with a hint of peevishness. But I knew I could not deny him. I still carried a secret torch for Prince Helios, one that'd been burning for many years and couldn't be extinguished so easily... This was why I had to stay firm and focus on the most important thing of all. I gritted my teeth, reaffirming my resolve.

"Can you give me some time? I can organize my schedule and get back to you."

"Fine. I'll be waiting then."

"Okay. Your Highness, I promise I'm going to do everything I can!"

"...What? Uh. Well. Don't work too hard. You always overwork yourself,

Seren.”

There was no such thing as overwork where this matter was concerned. No matter how hard it might be, I was going to become a High Mage and I was going to get this engagement annulled, darn it!

I watched Prince Helios leave for the salon, nodding as he admonished me once more to “Take it easy and don’t go overworking yourself.” Then, once I was certain he’d left, I burst out of the archives in a huge hurry.

The hour had grown late. And after Vi had expressly offered to wait on our bench for me, too.

I checked the corridor was clear before bolting down it, slamming open the doors, and making my way outside. I could see the little alleyway that led to the bench. Hurrying down the path, I noticed that no one was around, not even Vi.

Perhaps Vi was seated on the bench already. Or perhaps he’d already left. I was glad no one was around, anyway. Picking up my skirts, I began to race down the alley.

I could see the bench at the end of the alleyway now. Out of breath, I nonetheless picked up speed. Yes, I could see the bench and a black shape, but...

It was Lord Viol sitting on the bench.

“Wha...?” I gagged.

I was so shocked that my brain seemed to have stopped.

What? Huh? But... Where’s Vi?

I came to a stop, my jaw hanging loose.

I was so stunned, it didn’t even occur to me to greet him. Viol sat on the bench, clad in black from his robe to his hair, offset only by his perfect doll-like face. All I could do was stare.

He appeared to be absorbed in reading, and his face was composed, with no hint of the sappy expression I’d seen him directing toward that cupcake the other day. He wore glasses with thin gold frames and was silently turning the pages of his book. He looked so elegant that I felt captivated. All of a sudden,

his hand paused as if he'd noticed me watching him, and he slowly lifted his head to face me.

"Oh, Lady Seren."

He removed his glasses, his eyes softening. For some reason, I could feel my heart hammering in my chest. My cheeks felt hot. I tried to take calming breaths, hoping to steady myself.

"Lord Viol. I'm sorry I'm so late."

"It's fine. I had a good book to read, so never mind."

I couldn't help smiling. He was so like Vi with the way he turned his face away and spoke in a dismissive yet considerate tone.

"Hmm? Is there something amusing?" he asked.

"Yes... It's just that your voice and mannerisms...are so like Vi's that I just had to smile."

"Hmm. I see."

He frowned for a moment, his handsome face looking colder and more composed than ever. At the same time, I could almost see a ghost of Vi's catlike features superimposed there, and it was so adorable I wasn't quite sure how to react.

"Well, he *is* my familiar," he stressed. "It's no surprise we resemble one another."

"Incidentally, where *is* Vi?"

If possible, I was hoping to get some soothing pets in, you see. Not that I'll admit that to Lord Viol.

"I've sent him on other duties. I heard from Vi that you were looking for certain texts, so I brought them for you. It'd have been impossible for a cat to carry."

There was a sizeable stack of books seated beside him. With my skinny arms, I wouldn't be able to carry them myself without taking great care to balance them perfectly.

"This many?! May I really have them?!" I exclaimed.

"Mm-hm. Perhaps I brought too many?"

"Hmm. Well, I really want to read them, so I'll do my best to carry them, whatever it takes!"

"Yes, please do."

Did Lord Viol...just smile?



“I apologize. I thought making too many trips to see you might publicly inconvenience you, so I went rather overboard,” he confessed.

“That certainly makes sense... After all, I’m still...”

The thought made me smile sadly. *Right. I’m still engaged...*

“I’ve already memorized all these, so there’s no need to return them,” he instructed. “In fact, I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I really do appreciate it.”

“Pay it no mind. I heard from Vi about what a dedicated student you are. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you. It’s nice that you call the black cat Vi as well.”

“!”

For a moment, Lord Viol froze before looking awkwardly down at his boots.

“Vi was, uh...pleased to have received that name from you.”

“I see. That makes me very happy to hear. I’m so glad he likes it.”

He really *was* just like Vi. I’d heard all about how the Frosty Archmage of the Third Mage Guild was as cold as ice himself, unfeeling, never showing any emotion. How wrong those rumors were!

True, he wasn’t particularly expressive in the face. Still, it was obvious he displayed the full spectrum of human emotions. And he frowned and froze up quite visibly whenever he was unsure how best to respond to something.

This tendency was so like Vi’s, it absolutely tickled me pink.

It was a shame I didn’t get to see Vi. But oddly, talking with Lord Viol had a similar soothing effect. I’d been experiencing mental turmoil just before, but it’d really quieted down during our short exchange.

“At any rate, Lady Seren...has something happened?” he asked softly.

“Pardon?”

“It’s just...you don’t seem yourself.”

Amazing! A mage of Lord Viol’s caliber can even read moods!

I'd been trying very hard to keep a composed expression. I may have been visibly upset when we met the other day, but now, I was sure I had maintained a perfect poker face.

I was honestly impressed. Lord Viol and I had only met once or twice, but he could read such subtle changes in my mood.

"I heard about your situation from Vi. Keeping it all bottled up will only weigh you down. If you voice your feelings, you may find your burden grows lighter," he advised.

Even as he spoke, Lord Viol put his glasses back on, picked up the book he'd been reading just before, and resumed reading it. Eyes still on the book, he continued in a muted tone, as if speaking only to himself.

"I am simply sitting here reading my book. Feel free to unburden yourself. Simply pretend I'm not here to hear."

I could hardly pretend *that*. Still, I was touched by his kindness.

I sat down carefully on the bench, the stack of books Lord Viol had brought forming a barrier between us. Then I decided I'd begin unburdening myself, just a little, using a voice that was hardly above a whisper.

But for some reason, I couldn't muster the courage to speak. The silence stretched out, the sound of Lord Viol turning the pages in his book seeming oddly magnified. He didn't attempt to hurry me but just sat silently and calmly beside me. I was filled with even more gratitude...and finally, I could speak.

"His Highness...has asked me out on our first official outing together. But I cannot find it in my heart to be happy about it."

Lord Viol continued flipping steadily through the pages. It was unclear if he'd even heard me or not.

"If His Highness and Marietta appeared side by side, they would look like a gorgeous painting. That's all I keep thinking about. I can't help it. I had no idea I had such a cowardly heart."

"You would look no less lovely by his side, if you ask me..."

This was spoken in a throaty whisper, in a voice even quieter than mine. I

looked at Lord Viol, startled, and his shoulders immediately jerked. Then his ears went bright red.

“F-Forgive me, I truly didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

As he hung his head in embarrassment, I got a sudden mental image of Vi hanging his own furry head dejectedly. It made my heart skip a beat. I wished I could soothe him by petting his head and saying “There, there.”

But if I did such a thing to Lord Viol, I’d never be able to look him in the eyes again. My hand trembled, aching to stroke his beautiful black hair. But I clamped it between my thighs to keep it in check.

“Thank you. You are too kind, Lord Viol.”

“It wasn’t said out of obligation. But no matter. I must be leaving.”

Ears still bright red, Lord Viol got to his feet. I panicked. I couldn’t waste this rare opportunity to meet with Lord Viol by only talking about inconsequential matters.

“Oh, please wait. I wanted to talk about how to compensate you—”

“Ah, about that. I have an idea how, but let’s shelve the issue for now. I want you to focus on self-study.”

Without even turning, Lord Viol waved an amiable hand and began walking off, boots scuffing as he went. Unable to call out to him, I could only watch him leave. But then he came to a sudden stop.

“That’s right, I almost forgot. Your spell circulation today is very good. Much improved from yesterday. Keep up the pace!”

Lord Viol turned to look at me, and I just knew I was grinning from ear to ear over this compliment. Actually, I had been feeling pretty confident about how well I was doing with the spellcasting today. I was delighted that he’d noticed.

I bowed my head low in thanks. When I raised it again, Lord Viol was nowhere to be seen.

But I wonder what he has in mind for compensation?

I was intensely curious, but who around could enlighten me? With nothing

else to do, I gathered up the pile of books and hurried home.



BACK home, I was desperate to dive into the magic books. First, though, I organized my schedule.

With five days in a week and six weeks in a month, I had sixty-seven days until I could apply for the examination. In other words, I had only thirteen weeks. If I didn't make an ironclad schedule, I'd never be able to pull this off.

Putting it plainly, a sheltered girl like myself would need at least a full month to be able to fight a magic beast and get a good result. And I had only one day a week off from the academy and the salons. In a month, I would only have six opportunities to try it. *Perhaps one month isn't going to be enough time after all...*

I paused, shaking my head hard.

There was nothing to be gained from worrying. I would just have to make the best possible use of the time I had available to me by spending it in active battle.

"First off, one week from today..."

I drew up a basic calendar in my notebook and then began penciling in my schedule.

Let's see... Today and tomorrow were originally earmarked for princess consort training. But now I can use that time for free study. I should try to read all these magical texts in that time. Then I can draw up summaries and lists of questions I have. I can probably finish two books a day at this pace.

The empty slot the day after tomorrow was meant as a day off, but I had plans for Vi to come on that day and teach me the necessary magic I needed to know. This was a critical stage in my training.

What time will Vi come? I wondered. I wanted as much practice time as possible, so I hoped he could come early. *Oh, I should've asked Lord Viol when I saw him today! Careless, careless, careless!*

After that, I blocked out two days for the academy and the salon, and then,

for the two days after that, the academy and self-study. The final day would be a day off. With this sort of weekly schedule, all I had to do was make sure to use the time wisely to learn all the things I needed.

But having said that, how much practice time would I need for each magical discipline? It took one night for me to learn the rejuvenation spell. Would future magics take about the same amount of time to master?

And, as Vi pointed out, it wasn't like I could practice offensive magic any time I wanted. It was frustrating to have to wait around for Vi to be able to practice spells. I wondered if I could somehow learn barrier magic by myself.

I kept jotting down little notes to myself, questions I had about magical procedure.

There must be things I could learn in the texts Lord Viol had given me. But at the same time, there were undoubtedly things I couldn't learn just from books. I was going to write down all the questions I had, and whatever I couldn't find the answers to, I'd ask Vi the next time we met.

Oh yes, and there was one more thing. I didn't know anything about magic beasts. Vi said I'd need to subjugate a mid-level one. *What kind of beast is that? How dangerous is it? What are its vulnerabilities? How can I best approach it?* I'd need to research all of that.

Once I finished with all of these texts, I would need to pay another visit to the archives.

With complicated thinking time over, I finally felt like I could relax. Now all I had to do was research like crazy, study new magical techniques, and everything would turn out great.

All right. Time to get down to business.

I picked up the nearest text, and that's when I remembered: ...*Goodness! What am I to do about Prince Helios's invitation?*

Viol 3

A Diligence All Her Own

I woke up at an indistinct time: too late to call morning, yet too early to call afternoon.

Despite being on barrier duty the night before, I wasn't particularly tired. I slept well and awoke feeling refreshed. I'd exhausted my magical stores by casting high-tier fire magic before sleeping, using the rejuvenating trick I'd taught Lady Seren. I hypothesized that it'd also help refresh me and the results were good.

I was feeling splendid, in fact.

I thought that casting rejuvenation magic was an annoyance, but I shouldn't have underestimated it. I decided I'd use this trick daily now.

On my days off, I was left to my own lazy devices, since the housekeeper did not come then. But the hour was late, and it was time to get up and moving. After all, I had a student waiting for me. A diligent student who was desperate to learn.

I picked up one of the rolls tucked into the weave basket and poured myself a bowl of soup—both things had been prepared for me in advance by the housekeeper. I let my mind wander as I thought about the student I'd be visiting shortly.

I was...*surprised* by Lady Seren.

On that first day, despite staying up late fervently learning the new spell, she'd displayed no signs of exhaustion come morning. Instead, she had made leaps and bounds, displaying an impressive mastery of finetuning her spell output and sustained casting.

Her focus was remarkable.

You would be hard-pressed to find someone able to sustain that length of unbroken concentration, even amongst the students at the Magic Academy. If those skills had indeed been honed by princess consort training, then her lessons must've been much more grueling than I'd been imagining.

But then I recalled my frenemy, young Prime Minister Borden, was known to

wax lyrical about how expansive and intense that educational path was. When I'd asked if etiquette and so on wasn't drummed into all rich young ladies from birth, Borden made a sour face and muttered, "Regrettably not."

He had ranted about how it was an essential facet of international relations to learn the customs and etiquette of various countries and that there were certain ways one had to act at ceremonies, depending on the host country and so on and so on *ad nauseum*. Honestly, I regretted even asking.

Most of my intel on Lady Seren had come from Borden. At the time, though, I never could've imagined things would progress like this. Regrettably, I'd failed to retain even half the information I had learned.

I should've listened more attentively. Well...no point regretting it now.

Lightly snorting in amusement, I got to my feet, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and donned the suit and robe I always wore in public. Then I slipped my feet into my boots and was ready for business.

Since I'd be transforming into a cat, it didn't really matter *what* I wore. But this was part of my routine. It helped me get ready to face social interaction. *It's all in the prep and mindset.*

All right. I guess I'll head out, then.

After peppering myself up, I left the house for Lady Seren's residence.



"...**YOU** have got to be kidding me."

I could only grin wryly in surprise.

"What's wrong, Vi? Did I make a mistake somewhere?"

Lady Seren looked concerned, but I wasn't laughing at her. My surprised amusement stemmed from the extensive sheaf of notes splayed out in front of my black front paws. They were covered with magic diagrams, detailed with extensive, step-by-step notes on each minuscule facet of the casting process from start to finish.

She also appeared to have drawn up tables listing various magic spells using wind magic—her current forte—as well as non-elemental magic. *She must've*

researched these extensively on her own. There was also a schedule drawn up, listing self-study times, derivation magic, high-tier magic, points to be aware of, and all manner of things that indicated a serious diligence toward independent learning.

I also noticed a list of questions she wanted clarification on, as well as a list outlining which things she wanted to learn and in what order... *Ah.* She was even intending to study up on magic beasts.

She'd done an incredible amount of studying in just the past day or so since I last saw her. I had given her the learning materials, sure. But this diligence was all her own.

"I'm just...taken aback by your dedication to learning, Lady Seren," I admitted.

"Well, I don't have much time, do I? And I need at least a full month for practicing magic beast subjugation techniques, don't I?"

"*Hmm*, indeed. That was my plan as well."

"Well then, I have to study as much as I can on my own, in order to make the most efficient use of my time," she stated simply.

Dear me. She's even more impressive than I gave her credit for. And the rejuvenation spell...she'd mastered it. It was steady as a rock. She had it humming nicely throughout her whole body, the output at just the perfect level. It was just the way I'd demonstrated it to her in the beginning.

In only the four days and some hours since I'd taught her the spell, she'd managed to master it to this extent. I never could've imagined it.

"Your rejuvenation spell seems firm and steady. I must admit, I never expected you to proceed this far in such a short space of time."

"Oh, thank you! I'm so glad to hear you say that!"

Lady Seren beamed, looking extremely pleased. When she smiled like that, you could still see the cherubic innocence of youth in her features but combined with a firm resolve. She had guts. Not even a High Knight could compare to her.

"Hey, Vi. I was wondering if...if...I could cuddle you?" she suddenly asked.

“Wh-What? What’s all this about?”

“I haven’t gotten to see you in a while. I just want some soothing...”

How could I say no, if it was to be a reward for all this hard work? As long as we were clear that’s what it was, then I saw no harm in letting her do it.

I approached her and Lady Seren reached out her alabaster arms to me.

“May I?”

“As a reward for your excellent progress.”

She scooped me up, nuzzled her cheek against my fur, then placed me on her lap and proceeded to stroke and pet me to her heart’s content. Lamentably, I’d grown used to this handling by now and found myself enjoying it too much for comfort. The sense of embarrassment never went away, though.

But it’s fine. I told myself with the same repetition as casting a spell. *I’m a cat. There’s no tell-tale blushing to give me away. So, yes, this situation’s fine... probably.*

“Hey, Vi? You praised my magic technique just now, right?”

“...Mmn.”

Gadzooks! The petting was so pleasant, I was half-asleep.

Lady Seren continued to stroke my back slowly as she cleared her throat. “I’ve actually been secretly practicing these past few days during classes at the academy.”

“Hey now... You must pay attention in class, you know.”

“Don’t worry. I read up on everything covered on the syllabus already. I only need to focus on the stuff I’m not totally sure on.”

“I see.”

Right... Lady Seren’s mental preparedness is in a class of its own. She’s even utilizing class time at the academy for this.

“The other day when you came, you said you wanted me to focus hard on the rejuvenation spell, on holding it steady, on endurance, and on adjusting the output to the correct level, right? You said that it could help me learn future

techniques and even be the deciding factor that helps me pass the examination.”

“I did indeed. And it is true.”

“You said it would help with casting magical barriers too.”

“Indeed, I did.”

I was impressed. She really *had* been listening. If only the students at the Magic Academy had half her retention level, more would absolutely go on to pass the High Mage exam.

“*Hehe*, Vi. That tickles!”

Whoops... Distracted by my thoughts, I hadn’t noticed that I was flapping my tail against Lady Seren’s thigh. It was something like fidgeting, a nervous habit. Tucking my errant tail firmly between my legs, I tried to get back to business.

“My apologies. So, what of these things I said?” I asked.

“...I was worried about casting the barrier spell. At this rate, I’m going to be toast. My magical power keeps giving out every day, multiple times, you see. Then I have to cast the spell anew every time.”

“Now, now, you’ve only just begun. We will tackle that as we come to it.”

“No, I can’t be so laidback about it. My magic gives out whenever I’m taken aback by something or doing something else intensive... Like when I run, it goes out altogether. In a battle situation, that could be fatal.”

She was a diligent student indeed. And she was able to self-analyze. I closed my eyes in satisfaction, dropping my chin down onto her thigh. It was good that she was so perceptive. It made explaining things so much simpler.

“So I tried to think about why that was happening,” she continued, “and I think it’s because I’m not used to actually casting magic, so I end up putting all of my energy into maintaining the spell. But then I don’t have anything left over for other stuff. If I could channel my energy into two streams, for example, then I could cast a barrier with one stream while doing other things with the other... couldn’t I?”

I thought my jaw was about to drop off.

Unlike offensive magic, which requires concentrated, spontaneous, and instantaneous casting, continuous magic is something that must be kept running in the background on a low frequency, allowing the casting of other spells alongside it. Like Lady Seren said, being able to pull off other spells or activities at the same time, well...that was the ultimate challenge.

That said, this was a technique for her to learn much later down the line. Right now, she needed to spend the next few months practicing the basics as much as she could.

There are steps to mastering sustained spellcasting, after all.

First comes practicing the spell itself, then adjusting its output, and finally extending its duration. Most mages suffer setbacks at the first step. Learning to cast and adjust the output of a spell is something everyone goes through in the first stages of learning magic. But in actuality, there are only a handful of spells that even necessitate extended casting.

To begin with, sustaining concentration for extended periods is a difficult thing in itself. Spellcasting takes greater physical and mental energy than you might imagine. In Lady Seren's case, even though she was such a beginner, she had made extraordinary progress, even at this first step. Particularly in sustaining the spell.

That was why I'd been pushing her.

Usually, if the first step proceeds smoothly, we go straight to the second. Learning to adjust the spell output and sustain it at the same time. It generally takes a month or two to get this aspect mastered. On this occasion, with time against us, I planned to move on to the next step after two weeks. But Lady Seren was trying to proceed under her own steam, without me even having explained things.

The third step was learning how to perform other spells and actions at the same time.

"Look! My output doesn't waver even if I do something that requires deep concentration like embroidery!" Lady Seren proudly showed me a handkerchief, covered with embroidery so skilled it could've been sold in a shop.

“Remarkable.”

“The spell held steady even when I was studying and making notes this morning, too!” she exclaimed.

“Remarkable.”

I feared I might faint. Lady Seren was overflowing with raw ability. She had what it took to become a High Mage, more than anyone else. *This* was the kind of person we needed among our ranks. *Too bad, Borden. I shall take Lady Seren into our fold, instead.*

Besides, the palace had plenty of skilled manpower of its own. The king and queen were said to be kind and just, and while I didn’t know much about the younger generation of staff attending to Prince Helios, if there were any gaps there, I could only ask that they fill them on their own.

“Lady Seren.”

“What’s up?”

“You were *born* to be a High Mage. You *must* become one!” I stressed. “Any other future would be a waste!”

“Oh, Vi, really? I’m so happy to hear you say that!”

Lady Seren smooshed my furry cheeks together in delight. Then she began massaging my jowls and chin.

“How’s that, Vi? Does that feel nice? I asked a friend—someone who’s crazy about cats—and they said that cats love it when you rub them right here.”

What kind of crazy intel has this woman been gathering?! Goodness! Unbelievable! And yet...what a blissful sensation...!

Losing myself in the pleasure of her heavenly touch, I was just about to push my chin deeper against her hand when she finally let go.

Ah! That was a close call!

Seemingly satisfied with having cuddled, smooshed, and massaged every inch of me, Lady Seren let me down gently onto the table and gave me a gentle smile.

“Thank you, Vi. I feel much better! Now, I wonder if you could teach me battle techniques now?”

Clearly, she needed no further assistance with rejuvenation magic. At this rate, she’d master battle spells in the blink of an eye as well. *In which case, I should hurry up and teach it to her so that we can move on to practical training in beast subjugation.*

Only...there was one thing that still concerned me.

“All right. However, you mustn’t try to cram too much in at once. I absolutely *forbid* you to overdo it. How is your general condition, by the way?”

“I’m okay. I feel great, in fact. I slept like I was in a coma, after all.”

“Your complexion does look good.”

“My skin is smoother than ever too! All thanks to your help, Vi.”

When we’d met down that alleyway, she looked pale and sick, although perhaps that was because she’d been crying. But now her cheeks were rosy, her hair and skin lustrous, and her eyes sparkling.

I wanted to give her a friendly swipe of the paw and berate her for deliberately going without sleep until now.

“Well, as long as you don’t force yourself too much, it’s fine. Now let us begin. Time is a luxury we don’t have.”

“Okay!”

Ah, I like a perky affirmation.

I cast an eye over the notebooks she’d laid open for me. With this much groundwork having already been done, we could skip right over the fundamentals of spellcasting altogether.

Also, she already had the basics of healing magic down with her rejuvenation spell. So what she needed now was to learn wind magic, which would form the basis for her battle spells. Perhaps we should start with the top entry on this list of “Spells I Want to Master.” Number one was a wind magic spell: “Wind Cutter.”

Seeing as the notebook was left open on that page...perhaps that was her secret way of telegraphing her intent? I padded over to the notebook and pointed to the words “Wind Cutter” with a forepaw.

“We shall begin here with the Wind Cutter spell.”

“Really? Oh, yay!”

Lady Seren looked delighted as I’d predicted.

“It says that Wind Cutter is a really powerful spell that you can use right up to the high-tier level and that the better you are at it, the more blades made of pure wind you can conjure! I really, *really* wanted to learn this one first!”

Lady Seren’s eyes sparkled with the fire of excitement, so I graciously indulged her and proceeded to teach her the Wind Cutter technique.

Skipping straight to the results: as unbelievable as it may sound, she learned the Wind Cutter spell in the space of just one hour.

“...You are amazing,” was all I could say.

“It’s all thanks to your great teaching, Vi.” Lady Seren thanked me with an adorable smile.

She appeared oblivious to her own spectacular results. It was somewhat alarming. But then again, she’d never attended the Magic Academy and had never seen for herself how much others tended to struggle with learning complex new spells.

However! It is no ordinary feat that you’ve pulled off, Lady Seren! You are, in fact, a marvel!

I looked up at her through narrowed eyes as she calmly sipped some tea during a short break.

“Hey, Vi. How many blades do you think I would need to topple a mid-level magic beast in one strike?”

I was wondering what she was thinking about. As I predicted, it was something grandiose. *Toppling a magic beast in one hit...that’s an extreme level of difficulty we’re talking about here.*

“It depends on the opponent’s defenses...but for a mid-level foe... I’d say at least thirty blades would be required.

“But I’ve only been producing one or two at a time! I have to do some serious training!”

She raised a fist in the air, jaw set and determined. *Not a very ladylike pose.* My ears and tail twitched unavoidably. *Why doesn’t she realize? Being able to conjure several physical blades in only a short space of time like this is already a shocking feat in and of itself, and... Eh, forget it. This is Lady Seren we’re talking about, after all.*

Lady Seren finished her tea, then got to her feet with a spring in her step. Magic was already beginning to course through her once more.

“You’re getting back at it already?” I asked, eyes wide.

“Yes. I only needed a short break. Oh! But you sit there and relax, Vi.”

Leaving me sitting on the table, Lady Seren moved to stand in front of the barrier, then took a deep breath. Seeing her like that, I was alarmed. I jumped down from the table and ran to her feet.

“Yeek?!”

“Stop, stop, stop!” I shouted.

“What? What’s the matter, Vi? Why are you acting so panicky?”

“You may well ask! What are you doing, trying to cast offensive magic and a rejuvenation spell at the same time?”

“S-Sorry. Was I not supposed to? I thought it was like the protective wall. I thought it’d help me learn how to channel two streams of magic at once.”

“It’s far too dangerous! You must master each separate spell first! It’s too risky to attempt to use unfinished spells in tandem! Please! No more of this foolishness!”

Of course, I want her to use concurrent magic in the future, but not at this stage...!

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was that dangerous. Oh, look, your poor fur’s all

standing on end.”

Lady Seren looked contrite, but I knew she was a stubborn shrew. Never before had I seen anyone attempt to use a spell they’d only just learned in tandem with another. It was the height of hubris.

Then I recalled her notes.

Usually at the Magic Academy, students would be tasked with repeating spells over and over until they’d learned them.

But she was more the independent learner type. No doubt she already had a plan laid out for what she wanted to learn and would look up things herself, practicing what she could on her own before reviewing it in class. She didn’t need me to cheer her on, slap her on the flanks and yell, “Giddyup!” ...No, she needed someone to tug on the reins and tell her to slow her roll. She needed someone to keep her firmly in check.

The rest of the day, Lady Seren practiced her Wind Cutter. Even I was taken aback, perhaps alarmed, by the level of intensity she put into her practice.

“Hey, Vi. I’d like to practice Wind Cutter by myself, if possible. Could you teach me how to make the safety barrier too?”

“No.”

“But—”

“It’s far too dangerous. At this juncture, safety is of the utmost importance.”

She could beg all she liked, but my answer would always be no. If I allowed her to practice alone, she might accidentally unleash a spell capable of breaking her own barrier. She needed constant supervision and guidance to make sure she didn’t go overboard. I’d already decided what my stance would be and was determined not to waver.

The hour was growing late, so I decided to wrap up today’s lesson. And now, it was time for apple pie. She’d cut it into adorable little squares, no doubt for ease of eating. Even so, pie crust ended up everywhere.

“I apologize...for the mess...” I whimpered.

Pie crumbs and globs of apple were strewn about the table from my poor

attempts at eating them. *Impossible. My cat mouth is far too small.*

“It’s okay, I can wipe it up later. What would you like for tomorrow’s treat?”

“Ah, there’s no need to prepare a treat every day... But if possible, I would like a chocolate fondant cake...”

“Oh! But I thought that cats weren’t supposed to eat chocolate.”

“I am no ordinary cat; I am a mage’s familiar. So, there is no issue.”

Probably not, anyway, I told myself silently. But if worse came to worst, I could simply cast a detoxifying spell on myself after the fact. *Oh, the thought of that gooey, melting chocolate cake...* The duke’s pâtissier would no doubt provide a most delicious offering.

I waited until Lady Seren nodded and said “Okay then” before I got languidly to my feet. I’d taught all I came to teach and eaten all there was to eat. It was time to withdraw for the day.

A new week would begin tomorrow. Lady Seren could do with a rest. I jumped silently onto the windowsill and then remembered something.

There was something I’d been planning to ask her.

“By the way, Lady Seren, are you planning to attend the next royal evening party?”

“The one to be held two weeks from today? Yes, of course.”

“I see.”

“You even know about royal social events, Vi?”

Lady Seren was giggling. Why did she always seem so happy and joyful when I was around her in this form?

“My master was speaking of it, so I was just curious.”

“Oh! Then I wonder if that means Lord Viol will be attending too. If so, that *will* be a rare event.”

“That appears to be his intention.”

“Oh good, I can say hello to him there, then.”

As Lady Seren pointed out, my attendance at social events was sporadic at best. After becoming a High Mage and then an Archmage, I had attained the same rank as the upper echelons of the aristocracy, so I was invited to the royal balls and banquets held at least once a month.

They are a means for young people to find partners and for married people to exchange information. There are many who make sure never to miss a single event. Many High Mages make a point to attend, even though most among our rank abhor socializing. But perhaps because I'd risen from commoner stock, I avoided social gatherings even more than the others. At any rate, such functions make me...uneasy as a rule.

I had attended the first few events and forced myself through them. But I became stressed out, unable to even eat dessert in front of so many curious eyes. I also disliked being approached by strange women. The dance steps, too; I was loathe to waste precious magic practice time learning those. The whole thing was nothing but an imposition in my eyes.

But even so, I did attend now and then when I wanted to gather useful information. I singled out those in the know and left as soon as I was done. It didn't do much to make me popular, though, I'm afraid.

However, I did have plans to attend the next event.

For what other reason, of course, than Lady Seren herself...

Actually, I planned to go in there and shake up the young prince and his cronies.

When I learned the reason why Lady Seren wanted to become a High Mage, I was extremely irritated. In fact, half my motivation for helping Lady Seren was to see that spoiled rich prince get his comeuppance.

Considering what I now knew of Lady Seren...her determination was remarkable. I would never have expected it based on the tearful mess I'd encountered at first. And she had the raw talent needed to go all the way as a High Mage. Besides, she was earnest and good, skilled at petting, with a face as cute as they come. And she was an exceptional student.

Which was why, despite my desire to see her become a High Mage, I also felt

it'd be a great loss for her not to go on and become queen, as was her intended path. It caused me great internal conflict.

As the days went on, I grew more and more suspicious about the stance held by the spoiled prince and his chums, the catalyst for all of this.

What was behind this recommending of Marietta as a more suitable princess consort, anyway?

According to Lady Seren, the reasons they thought Marietta would make a better wife for the prince had everything to do with her prettiness and charms and with the fact that all were smitten with her.

However...

If it were me, I wouldn't be pushing the girl I was crazy over toward another man. While she was still unengaged, I'd swoop in and secure her for myself!

And if Prince Helios did get serious about Marietta, it would make her untouchable, placing her far beyond the reach of her admirers forevermore. Why take such a risk? I could imagine several possibilities, but it was beyond me to guess at the aristocratic mind.

And the prince asking Lady Seren on a sudden date at this juncture made even less sense. According to her, the prince was infatuated with her sister.

Hmm, but perhaps he's only following protocol. Lady Seren is his betrothed, after all. Goodness, what a tangled web aristocratic society is. All that pomp and ceremony, mixed up and at odds with their true feelings and emotions.

In order to put my thoughts into some semblance of order, I'd have to go and examine their actions for myself.

"Well, I shall be off now," I said.

"Oh, okay. Please take care on your way home."

Lady Seren scratched my chin, seeming reluctant to part and clearly oblivious to my whirling thoughts.

Goodness, not the chin.

In an attempt to escape, I pushed open the window with my paw. There was a

splendid sunset going on outside. The entire world seemed cast in shimmering gold.

“What a stunning sunset.” Lady Seren spoke in a hushed whisper of awe.

It was a stunning sight indeed. The lace curtains fluttered. Lady Seren’s face was beautiful as she gazed raptly at the sky. For a moment, the scene looked like a painting.

If only her world could always be this warm and peaceful.

“Enough with the studying and learning for today. You must rest,” I ordered.

“All right. You too, Professor Vi.”

I liked the wording of her response, but it lacked something in the way of conviction.

“You must promise.”

I left this parting remark, then hopped along the narrow window ledge and left the duke’s residence behind.

The sunset was so beautiful, I paused to gaze every now and then as I hopped between rooftops on my way home. In cat form, every rooftop was mine to traverse as I liked.

As I gazed at the melting sun, I thought about the events that would unfold from tomorrow. I needed to make significant preparations if I was to attend the evening party.

Seren 4

If Only We'd Talked More Before Now

“OH, dear...”

I sighed silently to myself in class at the academy as I looked over my upcoming schedule in my notebook.

It looked like Vi was determined not to teach me how to cast barrier magic for the time being, which cut my Wind Cutter practice time short. At the very least, I had to sit tight for another week, which I found hard to bear. Apparently Vi saw me as some sort of wild, renegade student.

I planned to brush up on what I could using the books and tips Vi had given me so far. On my own, I had no way of knowing what might be dangerous for me to try, so I could appreciate what Vi said about setting the groundwork first and taking everything a step at a time to achieve steady results. But inside, I burned to do more.

By the end of yesterday's session, I was able to conjure four blades using Wind Cutter. At this rate, though, thirty blades seemed like a pipe dream.

“Hahhh...” I sighed louder this time.

I glared at my notebook, where I'd written down: Waterday, Fireday, Windday, Groundday, and Voidday—the five days of the week. Then I sighed again. Today and tomorrow—Waterday and Fireday—those were the days I always went to the salon. I wouldn't have any free time until the ninth evening bell rang. *Only two hours free to practice magic with Vi.*

I wanted to spend that short amount of time totally focused on practicing Wind Cutter. The rest of the time, I would work tirelessly on my rejuvenation spell so as not to waste a single second.

Then on Windday and Groundday, I had a lot of newly freed up time since I was released from my royal training lessons. But Vi told me he couldn't come

on those days. I had nothing to do except pour over my books and notes until the day Vi could teach me barrier magic.

I could study theory by myself, but my ability to actually practice magic was so limited...

I sighed again, and then a thought occurred to me.

Perhaps this week actually gave me more opportunities to make time than any other. Next week, Vi would likely agree to teach me barrier magic. He simply *had* to, or I didn't know *what* I'd do. But if he did, I would need to spend every spare second practicing from then on.

This pocket of opportunity I had right now might be a good time to actually have some fun with Prince Helios. It'd be the first time we really spent time together. No doubt the last time, too.

In just three more months, I would end up in a situation where I'd no longer be able to be by his side. No...not end up in it—it was a situation I *had* to make happen.

With a trembling hand, I drew a circle in red ink under the space marked "Windday."

Windday was one of the days where I didn't have to go to the salon, so it wouldn't inconvenience Prince Helios or any of the other usual salon attendees. Of course, Prince Helios's schedule came first. I would need to get the ball rolling by asking him if he had any plans or not. I'd go and discuss it with him today.

With my mind made up on that front, I suddenly felt a lot better. I felt like I'd been able to check off at least one of the worries on my list. Now I could concentrate on magic.

I breathed out slowly and began to focus my mind.

The rejuvenation spell covers the whole body like a very fine film, circulating all over at a very slow pace. Casting it as easily as breathing was obviously still beyond me. But I'd been able to keep it up without a break all morning, and I felt like I had gotten quite used to doing it now.

I attempted to increase and decrease the output by slight amounts, the thin “film” growing thicker, then thinning out again.

I smiled, pleased with my own results.

Yikes...I hope no one was watching. Anyone would think I was a lunatic if they saw me grinning to myself in class. I felt paranoid but couldn't look around without being conspicuous. I kept my head still and let my eyes dart around, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to me. I was safe. I would have to be more careful going forward.

Keeping my spell output at a low level, I flipped through my notebook. It was filled with everything I'd learned so far. Then my hand stopped on a certain page.

It was a small annotation that caught my eye, written beside the Wind Cutter heading: “The key factors with Wind Cutter are the number of blades conjured and the speed of attack. When these values are high, stabbing damage is greatly increased.”

Speed...

Is that an important factor with other spells too? I wondered.

Perhaps speed wasn't a factor with something like the rejuvenation spell, but the same couldn't be said of the barrier spell that I was to learn next. Being able to conjure a thick, sturdy barrier at a second's notice was something I'd need to master.

I raised my output, testing my ability to thicken the membrane in the space of a second. The next moment, the membrane suddenly grew explosively thick.

“!!!”

My eyes flew wide in alarm.

Behind me, I heard a loud clatter. That sent my already jangled nerves into overdrive. I turned around to see Riesz standing there, eyes wide and staring. We made eye contact.

Oh, I forgot! Riesz and I actually share several classes at the academy. How careless of me!

His look of surprise...it had to be because of my magic.

Meanwhile, our classmates were teasing Riesz.

“Don’t fall asleep in class,” the boy nearest to him laughed.

“I wasn’t even sleeping,” Riesz shot back with a wry grin, looking embarrassed.

I felt guilty for some reason.

This wasn’t good. I wished class would just hurry up and end. I would make sure to choose a nice discreet seat in the back row for the next one. I didn’t feel like carrying out any more experiments after that. I sat still and quiet for the rest of the class.

Finally, the bell rang, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I got to my feet, planning to switch to a different seat, when I heard a voice behind me.

“That was *quite* the surprise. Still...you never fail to amaze.”

I turned to see Riesz standing there.

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” I apologized. “I’m not used to it yet, and I had some trouble controlling the output...”

“There’s no need to apologize. I was honestly impressed. You’ve really come a long way with that spell in just a few days. It was very wobbly at first. Who’s your tutor? They must be good if you’re getting results like those.”

“It’s Lord Viol,” I said.

“Lord Viol? You mean *the* Archmage of the Third Mage Guild?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes. Lord Viol noticed how I’ve been weak and likely to faint from insomnia, so he taught me rejuvenation magic to help,” I explained, using the cover story we had come up with.

“You can’t be serious...” Riesz muttered those words, jaw agape even after he spoke. He shook his head, as if he didn’t believe me. “Him, though? I mean...has the world gone topsy-turvy?”

“Is it...really so unusual for him to help someone?” I asked.

“I heard he hates socializing with people. He’s not the kind of guy who cares about— I mean, he isn’t the sort of person to concern himself with others.”

“Well, to be honest, I was the one who sought him out first,” I admitted.

“I see.” Riesz nodded as if to say *That makes sense*.

I had often heard people refer to Lord Viol as the Frosty Archmage. It was hard to picture him in a such a cold, detached way after I’d seen him gleefully devouring cupcakes and acting so kind, just like his familiar Vi.

“I wonder if he could tutor me, too? Those results are something else. Perhaps you could ask Lord Viol for me?”

“Um, I’ve actually only met him a couple of times myself,” I told him truthfully. “And I don’t even know when I’ll run into him again. Still, I can try to ask him if you’d like.”

“What?!” he cried. “Then how have you managed to come so far?!”

“I’ve been reading books and doing my own trial-and-error self-study.”

I tried hard not to look away from his face. I wasn’t technically lying. I learned a lot of things from books and self-study. All I really did was leave out the tidbit about Vi.

For some reason, I felt it was best to keep that part secret.

“You’re a force to be reckoned with, Lady Seren...” he said in awe.

I’m so sorry, Riesz. The truth is that I’m totally having private lessons... It’s not that I’m anything special myself. It’s just that I have a very special, very cute kitty cat who’s been doing his best to give me excellent tutelage. Please forgive me for obfuscating the truth.

I watched Riesz walk off, shaking his head as he went. Internally, I begged forgiveness.



ONCE the day’s classes were done, I hurried to the salon.

Prince Helios was always the first to arrive. Out of a sense of public duty, I tried to be as early as possible, but somehow, Prince Helios always managed to

be earlier than me. Even so, if I went as early as I could, the chances were good that Prince Helios and I'd have a moment to speak in private.

Just as predicted, I arrived to spot his golden hair ahead of me in the corridor. Walking as fast as I could to catch up, I called out to him.

"Oh, Lady Seren. You're early today, as usual."

Prince Helios turned, giving me his usual radiant smile. I was unable to meet it and looked away. Seeing him made me feel happy and wretched at the same time, such conflicting emotions. Setting aside my emotions, I got straight to the point with him.

"What? The day after tomorrow?"

When I suggested that date for our outing, Prince Helios looked slightly taken aback.

Perhaps he's got other plans for that day...

"If you have other business to attend to on that day, I'm happy to reschedule," I said. "I only request that we choose a day I am not set to attend the salon."

"Ah. Well, I was thinking one of my days off would be better..."

"Oh, goodness. I couldn't ask you to spend one of your precious days off on me."

I was speaking earnestly, but for some reason, this made Prince Helios chuckle.

"Don't be dramatic. Anyway, you're my fiancée, Seren. You can take up my time whenever you'd like."

"Is that so?"

"It is indeed. In fact, I regret I haven't spent any of my days off with you before now. I'm sorry. That wasn't very considerate of me."

"Goodness me! You shouldn't trouble yourself over things like that, Prince Helios! Why, I never even thought anything of it!" I rushed to reassure him.

"That's a pretty sad thing to hear."

Prince Helios gave me a smile that honestly did look sad. It's true, though. I never thought twice about it. I never even had the time to feel lonely or neglected.

"Because...I've been so focused."

"Hmm?" Prince Helios raised a quizzical eyebrow at me and I smiled wryly back.

"I like to think I've gotten better. But I have always been the type of person who catches on slowly compared to others," I admitted. "That's why I can't neglect my daily studies. I have been devoting every spare moment to improving myself so that I will never be a burden to you, Your Highness."

As his fiancée, if I fell short, it would damage Prince Helios's reputation as well. The thought terrified me, so I always gave 110 percent to studying and training.

Once I had the basics down, I could make good use of them. Whatever skills I learned, I could adapt and use in a variety of different situations. Or so I'd always thought. I also felt like my study efficiency improved a lot.

But it wasn't until I reached the mid-level tier that I started being able to think that way. Thinking back on how long it had taken me to get this far, I felt like I'd taken too much time to make progress.

"I have been far too busy keeping up to worry about my position. So please, there's nothing for you to regret, Your Highness."

"Just hearing you say that reassures me. However, I disagree that you're slow to learn. I think you're just being modest. If you're slow, that'd make most people snail-paced." Prince Helios smiled. But it was a fact, really. I *was* slow to catch on.

"Your Highness, do you remember the first day we all had class together at the palace?"

"Oh yeah...we did have a few classes where all the children of counts or higher rank were made to attend... I'm afraid I don't remember the specifics, though."

Clearly, it had been but a trifling event to the others. To me, however, it was a day that had possibly changed the entire course of my life.

“I couldn’t understand what the teacher was saying that day at all. In just an hour, they had to stop the class five times. Everyone got so fed up with me. Even the teacher got this exasperated look.”

“I’m surprised to hear you went through a period like that too.”

“I can’t remember who, but one of the other boys snorted and said, ‘Poor Prince Helios, ending up with a dummy like this as his future queen...’ You stuck up for me, Your Highness, but everyone in class laughed at me, and I really did feel like an idiot. I felt so pathetic. So embarrassed...”

“Seren...”

“After everyone went home, I went to the teacher crying and asked for extra tutoring. Then I practiced and revised like crazy. The reason I have been able to make it this far...is because I learned to pour hundreds of hours into self-study in secret.”

As I trailed off, I suddenly realized what I was doing.

I looked up to see Prince Helios looking at me with a mixture of surprise and sadness on his face. *Why did I have to go and tell him that story? How’s he supposed to react to that? I only put him on the spot.*

“I knew you were working extremely hard to be the future queen, but I had no idea you were compelled to do so by such a traumatic event...”

“I’m sorry! I *really* shouldn’t have said anything about it.”

“...You and I are similar, you know.”

I apologized and tried to change the subject, but Prince Helios was muttering under his breath.

“I’m the same, you see.”

Prince Helios’s eyes crinkled at the corners and his lips turned up in a soft smile. I’d never seen this expression on his face before and felt my heart skip a beat.

“I have spent every waking hour—even time when I should sleep or rest—spurred to do my best, out of a sense of desperation,” he confessed.

“You experienced the same desperation, Your Highness? Ah, but the study path of a future king must be many times more varied and complex than that of a future queen.”

Princess consort training *was* rough. But a queen’s role is always a supporting one. It’s the king who has to handle the kingdom’s affairs and make all the tough decisions. A future king has so much more to learn about and understand than a future queen does.

I realized all over again how much Prince Helios must devote hours and hours to strict, regimented study, a fact totally hidden behind his easygoing, handsome smile.

“That’s true, yes. Actually, I feel even *worse* about myself because of that. I’m even more spineless compared to you and all your tireless efforts, Seren.”

“Nobody thinks that you’re spineless.”

“You’d be surprised. But anyway, never mind what people say. The issue is I feel that way about myself. And you’re the same, aren’t you?”

“Well... *Hmm...*”

Perhaps we can’t help the ways we feel and think. I nodded noncommittally, and Prince Helios gave me his usual warm smile.

“I feel a little better after talking about it,” he said. “It sounds like we have both been stubbornly working our butts off more than we need to just not to embarrass ourselves in front of each other.”

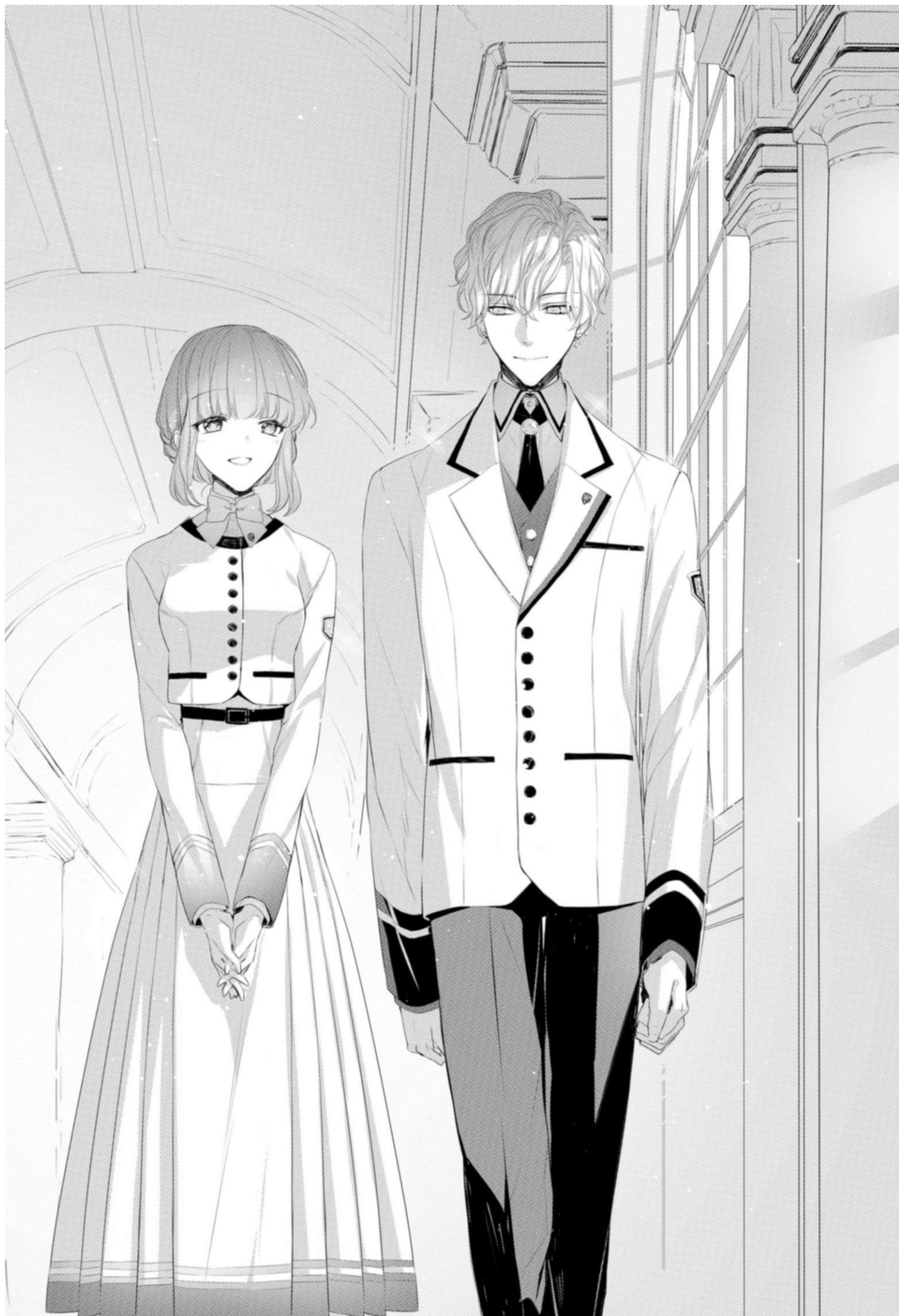
“Hehe, it certainly seems that way.” I couldn’t help smiling back at him.

“We should have opened up to one another like this earlier, instead of standing on ceremony,” he said. “Then we might’ve realized earlier how much the other was suffering. I’m sorry. I’ve been so caught up in myself.”

“It’s the same for me. But at least thanks to that, I learned effective methods of studying.”

“Right...we must see some good in the situation.”

I felt delighted that Prince Helios and I could smile and laugh together this way. It made me feel warm and fuzzy inside. *Even though I know now that I shouldn't appear too eager.*



“I think one of my days off would be best for our outing, after all,” Prince Helios said. “The next day off is... Ah, yes, let’s make it Voidday. I feel like you and I still have many things to discuss. And not all of them need to involve such serious matters. What do you say?”

“...I would like that, Your Highness.”

“Then I shall call upon you on Voidday. I shall send word of the exact time later.”

“I’m...looking forward to it very much.”

What a pleasant, smile-filled conversation that was.

Just then, we heard clattering footsteps at the end of the hallway, and Mashlo and the other salon boys came into view. The moment they spotted Prince Helios, the four of them came barreling our way.

“Sup, Seren! You’re early again today!”

“Prince *Heliooos*! We wanted to ask you about this weekend—”

“We found this great little place!”

“You should join us every now and then, you know!”

The four of them all started talking at once and it suddenly got rowdy. All of them, including Prince Helios, were a year my junior, and when the whole group got together, it was always chaos. I smiled dryly as Prince Helios rolled his eyes at them.

“I keep telling you, I won’t participate in your follies. Please stop inviting me.”

“Aw, come on, don’t say that!”

“Listen, I’m—” Prince Helios started, sounding like he was about to completely shut them down.

“Your Highness...” I interrupted him.

I was worried he was turning down their invitation because of the plans he’d made with me. Feeling guilty, I touched his arm, looking up at his handsome face beseechingly.

From the way he answered them, it sounded like Prince Helios rarely spent any of his days off with the others. He deserved the opportunity to be carefree with his friends every now and then.

He and I could have our outing another time.

But just as I was about to say that, Prince Helios gave me a dissuasive look and I clamped my mouth shut, not saying anything in the end.

“I have plans to go out with Seren then. You four go off and have your fun.”

“With...Seren? That’s unusual.”

“Hey... No! You can’t! You absolutely can’t! That’s *not* acceptable!”

All of a sudden, Mashlo started yelling. I looked at him in surprise.

He caught my eye and glared at me, hard. His distinctive, red eyes seemed to burn into my own, and I looked away at once.

“Y-You’re not going to make it in time for Marietta’s birthday!”

“!” My breath caught in my throat as Mashlo said that.

“If we tell her you picked it out, Prince Helios, then Marietta will be delighted for sure.”

“He’s right. Listen, Prince Helios, can’t you give us guys a little of your time? Either before or after your plans with Lady Seren should be fine.”

“It’s not such a big deal to do that, right?”

Once Mashlo brought it up, the others joined in pleadingly. I felt like all the blood had drained from me. Yes, it *was* Marietta’s birthday next week. It sounded like the others wanted to go and buy her a joint present.

“For...Marietta?”

Prince Helios probably really wants to go with them, doesn’t he?

I wanted to ask, but I couldn’t. After all, Prince Helios had so firmly said no.

“Right! You want Marietta to be happy on her birthday too, don’t you, Seren?” Mashlo pushed.

“Yes...of *course*, I want her to be happy...” I said.

Marietta's innocent smiling face appeared in my mind. I was delighted that Prince Helios seemed willing to put me first.

But is this really right? Is this really the best thing for Marietta and for Prince Helios himself...?

As I stood there hesitating, Prince Helios put his hand warmly on my shoulder and pulled me close. I looked up at him in surprise to see him giving me a reassuring nod.

"Seren, there's no need for you to even think."

"But..."

"Mashlo, you can ask me again and again, but as long as that's your plan, then I shall not go. Also, it doesn't matter how much it vexes you to have your wishes denied, you will not say or do anything to hurt Seren's feelings."

Prince Helios spoke sternly, with a sharp expression on his face. Mashlo immediately hung his head, looking remorseful.

"I... Forgive me, I just—"

"If you're going to apologize, direct it to Seren."

"Sorry..."

Mashlo apologized to me awkwardly, then slunk into the salon, shoulders drooping. The other three hurried in after him. They all seemed to stiffen slightly as they crossed in front of Prince Helios, which surprised me a little.

I thought we'd go on into the salon too. But instead, Prince Helios shut the door on them.

"For crying out loud... Never would I have imagined they'd say such things in front of you, Seren. I apologize for their unacceptable rudeness."

"It's fine..."

"You don't have to pay any attention to them or the things they say."

Prince Helios smiled at me, then patted my shoulder softly as if to say, *Cheer up!*

"Let's have fun together this weekend."

He flashed me a perfect smile, with perfect white teeth, then he opened the salon door and headed inside.



“WHY the long face? Did something happen?”

The black cat jumped smoothly in through the window and immediately noticed my expression. His tail and ears were both perked upright, almost like he was trying to approximate a human raised eyebrow. The effect was so comical, I had to grin.

“I guess it shows, doesn’t it?”

I kept telling myself I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t help reliving that scene outside of the salon over and over again in my mind. I’d managed to upset myself quite a bit.

Prince Helios was so sweet, saying, “Let’s have fun together this weekend,” but I still couldn’t seem to make myself perk up.

I was happy we’d be able to spend time together. But at the same time, I felt bad. It wasn’t the right thing to do to Prince Helios or Marietta.

I kept going back and forth between excitement and regret until I didn’t know how to feel.

I had Vi jump on my lap and set about wiping his paws. As I worked, I told him everything that’d happened. Once I was done cleaning his feet, his eyes snapped open; they’d been closed the whole time as he silently listened. But now, he focused his black pupils firmly on me.

He regarded me in silence for a few moments before finally speaking.

“How to put this... Have the two of you *really* never been out in public together before?”

Vi looked shocked and I had to grin.

“Yup, it’s true! We’ve been engaged since Prince Helios was born and yet, we never did... It’s odd, isn’t it?”

“Even though it’s been known the two of you would marry and live together

one day? I must confess I don't understand the way the aristocracy thinks at all."

Vi looked so solemn as he said that that I had to smile even more. *Why do cats always get to look cute, no matter what things they might choose to say?*

"I wasn't aware that cats thought about the aristocracy at all!"

"I... I apologize."

"No, it's okay. But I think both Prince Helios and I have been too absorbed in ourselves and never really gave much thought to what the other might be feeling."

We were both so desperate to succeed in our own roles.

Still, saying that was just a convenient excuse, perhaps. *Maybe it makes perfect sense for Prince Helios to favor Marietta after all.*

Viol 4

H-H-How Did You Know That?

“I’M glad that Marietta is the one Prince Helios loves.”

Lady Seren spoke in such a subdued tone, I had cause to doubt my own ears. I pricked them up and turned to look at Lady Seren gazing down at me.

Cat ears may be sharp, but they give too much away, swiveling this way and that. It didn’t really matter right now, but it could be an inconvenience when I wanted to pretend I hadn’t heard something.

When I looked up at her, she smiled at me.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I know what kind of girl Marietta is.”

Well, perhaps she did... I could only hope that was true.

“The thing about Marietta? She’s my complete opposite. She says these totally innocent, naïve things. She cheers up our entire family with her smile alone. It’s like warm spring sunshine.”

“I hope she’s as adorable as you make her sound.”

“What?”

“Ah, nothing.”

I let my inner thoughts slip...

I didn’t really know anything about Lady Marietta. But for some reason, I had a bad feeling about her. *I should never voice such things, though...*

After I heard about the incident at the salon the other day, I started to get the impression that the conceited girl was overly enjoying the fact that the boys were ditching their work in favor of chatting with her. *I apologize, Lady Seren. That was much too honest of me.*

“Since we were kids, she’s always been so earnest and perky with cute, honest expressions that change to show you exactly how she’s feeling. She picks up on others’ emotions too. She often worries that I’m pushing myself too much, even now. Sometimes she worries so much about me she ends up scolding me.”

“*Everyone* thinks you push yourself too much.”

“I’m sorry, Vi, could you speak up a little?”

I looked away when I muttered to myself, but Lady Seren picked up on it. I didn’t intend to say anything negative, but the words spilled forth unbidden from my furry lips.

The more Lady Seren tried to sing her sister’s praises, the more I felt like making snarky remarks. I had the feeling Lady Seren wouldn’t be too open to hearing them right now, though.

“Never mind, I was just talking to myself. So, what you are saying is that you think this sweet, caring sister is the best woman for Prince Helios by virtue of her sweetness?” I asked, trying my best to keep the snark out of my voice.

“Yes, even more so now after talking to him today and realizing we are surprisingly similar.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s the type to get everything done perfectly. He’s quick to catch on and figure out the right course of action, no matter the problem. I have always envied that about him,” she explained. “But I learned today that it’s not latent talent that makes him perfect. He’s like me, using pure effort and hard work to cover for his weaknesses. I realized he’s the type to push himself to extremes. Unless someone stops him, he’s likely to work himself past the point of exhaustion.”

Ah, so the lady does have some self-awareness. In that case, I wish she’d look out for herself just as well.

“But Marietta,” she continued, “she’s the type who hates to put in effort, and she doesn’t like to think about tough problems. Someone like her could really help balance Prince Helios out. I really think they’d be a great married couple.

The kind that brings out the best in each other and supports one another.”

“Hmm...”

“What’s wrong, Vi? Why do you look so stern and deep in thought?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

“Hehe, are you sure? Then why’s your tail flopping all over the place?”

“Ah! Forgive me...”

I tucked my errant tail between my legs. It had betrayed the inner workings of my mind yet again. Lady Seren giggled, her voice ringing out.

“Aw, you’re so cute! You know...just watching your adorable antics makes me feel like I’ve taken a drink from some refreshing mountain spring.”

“Good, that’s good...”

Meanwhile, I felt like I might die of embarrassment.

“I wonder if seeing Marietta has a similar effect on Prince Helios. If so, then I’m sure he’ll be very happy with her,” she pondered.

“You speak of your sister as if she were an adorable *pet*. I have to question that.”

“Oh no, it’s not like that. That’s not how I mean it!”

To hide my embarrassment, I jumped off Lady Seren’s lap onto the table, stretched once, and stuck my nose in the air. Lady Seren lightly booped it with a forefinger, grinning in delight.

“You know, humans get a boost of good feelings when they see, touch, or even think about something that means a lot to them,” she said.

“Do they now?”

I hadn’t really thought about it.

“Familiars don’t?” Lady Seren cocked her head to one side, gazing at me.

Sadly, being a familiar has nothing to do with it.

“For example,” she went on, “some people treasure things like family, romantic partners, flowers, or even food more than money or jewels. Although

money is definitely that thing for some people, the things that motivate and cheer people up are different depending on the individual.”

Ah, I see. So it's that wide in scope, is it? I think I understand now.

“I think it would be nice if Marietta could be Prince Helios’s special source of inspiration.”

Her expression was kind as she spoke. *Just an older sister, wishing good things for her younger sibling.*

But the sight of her face made my chest blaze. Without thinking, I spoke. “... You don’t have any...lingering feelings?”

“For Prince Helios? I would be lying if I said I didn’t. I mean, he *is* the man I grew up thinking I’d marry until just recently.”

She looked away, her eyes showing sadness. I felt a twinge in my chest.

“We’re to go out together next weekend. I plan to enjoy every single moment of it. And once the day is over, I’ll make a clean break and leave those lingering feelings in the past.”

She smiled, but it looked rueful. It wasn’t really much of a smile at all. It wasn’t the smile of a person who was happy about “making a clean break.”

My tail started whapping against the table in vexation.

“Vi?”

“It’s nothing. We don’t have much time. Let us get on with the lesson. Or are you not feeling up to it today?”

“Goodness! Not at all! I’m raring to go, actually!”

Lady Seren looked at me in alarm. The look on her face made me realize I hadn’t acted very mature just then. I released a small sigh under my breath. Then I drew a large circular barrier in the air.



THE following afternoon, I found myself sitting on the sofa in Prime Minister Borden’s office, a fairly lavish room located near the palace’s reception hall. Borden was a busy man, so I was grateful that he’d made time for me.

“Thank you.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. It’s a nice breather for me, too. So, what is it you came to see me about today?”

Borden cut straight to the chase, which suited me just fine. Despite my social issues, Borden was the kind of guy I could chat to without any unnecessary stress.

“I want to learn how to dance the waltz before the next evening party. I was hoping you might be able to recommend a good teacher.”

“That’s...unexpected. But I *do* know a good person for such a task. Are you acquainted with Count Blaze?”

“Possibly...but I can’t recall for sure.”

I was just being honest, but Borden chuckled and rolled his eyes, saying, “Typical you.”

“Anyway, he’s the one who taught *me* to dance, so I can vouch for his credentials. His lessons are difficult but very precise and to the point without wasting time. There’s only ten days until the next evening party, so his style of teaching is likely exactly what you need.”

“Indeed.”

I had reservations, but at this juncture, I simply had to grit my teeth and get on with it. The last thing I wanted was to embarrass myself in public, after all.

“All right. I’ll reach out to him at some point today, then. I think you can expect an answer tomorrow.”

“Prime Minister Borden works fast, as always,” I joked.

“I’m only going this far because your attendance record is rather abysmal when it comes to social events. If *this* is what it takes for you to be sociable, then I’ll do it.”

Borden smiled amiably as he poured tea. *He might seem a friendly chap, but to have attained the rank of prime minister at our age, well...you’d be wise not to underestimate him.*

The previous prime minister had actually been his father, but when the man suddenly died, there was quite a competition for the role. In the end, though, Borden beat out the others and was able to follow in his father's footsteps.

There was quite a fuss back then. It was all anyone could talk about during the balls held at the time. Everyone was talking about it, in fact. I recall being annoyed by the fuss.

"It doesn't really *matter* whether I attend or not, though..." I groused.

"The young unmarried ladies don't see it that way. Despite your...personality, you're a handsome, single man with striking black hair and eyes, too."

Great. Hearing that makes me want to attend even less!

Borden's light chestnut brown hair was very common in this kingdom, and black or red hair was considered quite the rarity. I cared nothing for those things nor for how handsome my face might've been in the eyes of others. In fact, talking about such things was my idea of a hellish time.

If there was time for idle chatter, I would much rather spend it discussing the magical goods I'd seen in foreign lands or new and interesting forms of magic or the mountains from which magic stones could be mined or other interesting things.

Borden gazed at me with amusement as I grimaced. Then he sat himself opposite me and adjusted his monocle, grinning.

"So? Why the sudden hurry? Are you planning to ask Lady Seren to dance or something like that?"

H-H-How does he know that?!

My hand paused in midair as I froze in the act of reaching for my teacup. Borden guffawed with laughter.

"Hahaha! Right on the money!"

"....."

Borden leaned back in his chair, chuckling as I gazed at him in horror. For some reason, he was wiping his eyes with his thumbs. *It was so funny it brought him to tears...?*

“How did you know?”

“Oh, I have my ways...”

Borden kept on chuckling. *Oh, he's not going to show his hand, is he?* I glared at him, racking my brain for any hints. There wasn't any third party who knew about—or could even *imagine*—my connection with Lady Seren, so I'd thought I was safe.

...Ah, but there is one person.

Lady Seren had mentioned him, the second son of the count, the one who'd transferred from the Magic Academy. The one who'd noticed her spellcasting. I think I even gave her permission to mention my name.

I lifted my head, certain I'd figured it out. Borden's face was still right there, still smirking at me. That's when it clicked.

Borden's younger brother...!

Actually, I recalled hearing about it directly from Borden. When he became prime minister all of a sudden, his younger brother switched paths from aiming to become a High Mage to attending the academy with Prince Helios.

I sighed deeply, sinking back against the sofa cushions.

Small world...

Borden was quite perceptive, being prime minister and all. I wouldn't be able to hide much from him. As I hesitated, Borden shrugged casually and spoke again.

“You've got some crazy ideas, don't you? She's Prince Helios's fiancée, you know.”

For now... was what I'd like to have said, but I would refrain from mentioning that for today.

“Is it so bad for me to ask her for a dance? Doesn't Prince Helios dance with many different girls? Is there some sort of rule that says an engaged girl is not allowed to dance with other men while her fiancé dances with other women?”

I asked just in case, since aristocratic society has so many odd rules. But it

seemed no such impediment existed. In fact, there was even a rule that unmarried people could dance no more than one dance with any given partner.

“I think everyone avoids asking her to dance out of respect for Prince Helios. At least, I do. She spends the dances laughing gaily with her female friends. If you asked her to dance, everyone would be sure to notice in a second.”

“Really...?”

Good, let them notice. My purpose was to observe the reactions of Prince Helios and his chums, after all.



TO my surprise, a message came the following day, saying that a teacher would be available to me that evening. Things happened so lightning-quick, I was stunned. Borden must’ve sprung into action the moment I left his office, just as he said he would.

When I showed up at the prime minister’s office ten minutes after business hours ended, I found Count Blaze, my dance teacher, already waiting for me. I was then whisked off to the dance lesson location, my head spinning.

I underestimated the speed at which Borden could act.

The dance lesson then began, but it was magnitudes more difficult than I had been expecting.

Both when I first attained the rank of High Mage and all aristocratic privileges and then when I was appointed Archmage of a mage guild, I vaguely remember having to take hasty lessons, as I might have to attend evening parties. But everything I learned seemed to have leaked from my brain since then and had clearly never been committed to muscle memory.

“You’re moving your feet too slow!”

“That’s the wrong step!”

“A man must never step on a lady’s toes!”

Count Blaze was relentless.

Apparently, it was he himself who’d taught me how to dance back then. No

doubt he was the man for the job when it came to matters of urgency.

Count Blaze seemed to remember me. “You again, is it?” he said with a scary look on his face. “So...you want me to teach you a waltz. That means you’ve forgotten everything I taught you before, doesn’t it, *hmm?*”

Perhaps *that* was why his teaching was so harsh. *But oh well...*

“You’re tangling your feet up. Stop overthinking the moves. Use your *body*, not just your mind. Your feet are dragging you down.”

Count Blaze sighed in frustration. My dance partner was an older lady with a good many years on me, but her moves were textbook perfect. Meanwhile, I was exhausted and out of breath. I was aware—painfully aware—of what a pathetic sight I must have been.

But truth be told, I was doubly alarmed by the fact I was in this sort of state despite using quickening magic, strengthening magic, and the rejuvenation spell.

“Count Blaze is notorious for his strict teaching. Don’t feel too upset.”

My partner, the older lady, smiled elegantly as she said this. There wasn’t a bead of sweat on her. Somehow that made her attempt to comfort me worse. Aristocrats seemed delicate but were actually quite physical beings, what with their love of swordplay, horse-riding and, yes, dancing. To someone like me, who’d focused myopically on magic since childhood, they seemed blessed with multiple talents.

“Good, good! You seem to have caught your breath. Now, today is still only day one. Let’s keep up the pace while you’ve still got it in you.”

Count Blaze’s teaching approach was sadistic. Positively sadistic.



THAT evening, I staggered my way to Lady Seren’s chambers well after the evening bell rang for nine o’clock. It was much closer to ten o’clock, actually.

“Vi! Oh good, you’ve come after all!”

When I peeked in through the window, Lady Seren came flying over. Clearly, she’d been quite concerned about my tardiness.

“I’m so relieved, I thought perhaps something terrible had happened.”

After collecting me from the windowsill, Lady Seren wiped all four of my paws with practiced ease.

“I apologize. I was caught up with other business,” I said.

“*Hehe...* So even familiars have business of their own to attend to, do they? Were you running an errand for Lord Viol, perhaps?” she asked.

“...Something like that.”

“Was it tough work? Your body seems kind of floppy today...? Almost like you’ve gone limp.” Lady Seren began rubbing my belly vigorously with both hands as she spoke.

“Stop that...!”

My hair stood on end as I thrashed about indignantly. Lady Seren laughed merrily but let me go.

“*Hehe*, sorry. You just seemed to have lost your pep.”

“Just a touch of mental exhaustion. I’d prefer if you didn’t add to it.”

My physical strength had been restored, but I still felt mentally wrung out. I never realized how little stamina I had. I made up my mind to begin a weight-lifting regimen. *Starting tomorrow. Maybe.*

“You’re tired? In that case, have something sweet to eat first.”

Well-versed in how to handle me by now, Lady Seren waved a financier—a small almond cake—in front of my nose. Unable to resist my desire, I sank my teeth into it.

After dancing my feet off, I came straight to her room without even returning home first. I was famished. I wolfed down the cake, and before I even knew it, I had eaten two—no, three whole pieces.

The duke’s pâtissier was a devil. I loved financier cakes and these were made exactly to my tastes.

“Satisfied?” Lady Seren asked.

“Yes, I think I can move now.”

I hopped onto the table and cast the usual large circular barrier spell. Lady Seren got up from her chair, looking at me with a pleased expression on her face.

“You know, I’ve been practicing upping my speed all day today so that I can eventually project the output I want instantaneously!”

“What?” I gawked at her.

“I’ve been so excited to see what happens when I try it with my Wind Cutter spell!”

Lady Seren unleashed a multitude of blades.

With a series of satisfying crashing, zinging sounds, the blades disappeared within the magical barrier. I watched to make sure they all vanished as they should. I realized that the fur on my back was standing on end.

What... What did I just witness...? The number of blades...has increased exponentially. That had to have been, what...ten separate blades just now?

“Yes! I knew it! Oh, Vi, did you see that? My number of blades has increased by so much!”

I could only nod. My eyes were still focused on the magical barrier which had swallowed the blades, but my jaw was no doubt hanging open.

“I tried to visualize what I read in the books yesterday and unleash as many blades at one time as I possibly could! Oh, but it’s really tough. I tried to visualize thirty separate blades, but it’s really hard getting the visualization right!”

“Y-Yeah...”

Yes, that’s very normal. It takes time to increase the number of blades. It’s a process. A process all must go through.

“So, then I realized that it’s really difficult for me to visualize a ton of different blades at once.”

It’s difficult for anyone. I, personally, top out at ten blades. But it’s a cumulative process, requiring much practice. Incidentally, it took me probably six months of training before I reached that ten-blade visualization.

“I thought maybe I should imagine one blade flying multiple times. But I can’t maintain concentration for more than maybe four or five blades.”

“Well...that’s a good way to tackle the problem,” I said. “If you keep this up, you’ll be able to send several blades spinning at once. Thirty blades might even be a reality someday.”

“Yes...but I don’t have a lot of time.”

Lady Seren smiled wryly. True, she didn’t have even six months to study, but she’d made such amazing progress in the time she’d had so far. Progress that deserved praise.

“Anyway, I was sitting in class when a great idea hit me. It’s hard to explain it, but it’s like...if I visualize a pillar of blades, then imagine myself releasing them in quick succession, working my way from the top-down, then there’s no need to visualize a single blade over and over. Instead, I can just make a whole bunch of them come flying out at once.”

“What?!”

“It worked amazingly well!”

“I’ve never *heard* of such a method before...”

“I’m not great at visualizing, but this way, I only have to visualize once, and then I can just focus on the conjuring speed and adjusting that. I think it’s perfect for me!”

I was shaken. *I knew she was diligent, but I had no idea she was such a visionary as well.*

In the world of magic, there aren’t many spell varieties. It’s more about combining fundamental forms of magic and increasing potency to create explosive and destructive spells. But if you’ve got real imagination, you can make magic do amazing things for you. That’s why it’s such a thrilling field to be in.

“Lady Seren, you’ve got incredible vision. Many mages stumble when it comes to visualizing. But in such a short space of time, you’ve managed to really think outside the box,” I praised her.

“It comes from habit, I guess. I’ve been slow ever since I was a child. Whenever I have to team up with someone on something, I always end up lagging behind. So I’m always thinking of ways to cut corners and speed things up, you see.”

Her way of speaking telegraphed a deep-seated sense of inferiority. I had noticed it a while back, actually. Looking at her now, none could fail to categorize her as a competent young woman. But the sense of inadequacy she’d clearly developed in childhood was still with her.

This was no doubt what was powering her voracious self-study and current inventiveness, which was a good thing. But it wouldn’t be good for her to allow her lack of self-confidence to take over, leaving her vulnerable to the sway of others.

“You must do something about that inferiority complex. You have more than surpassed your peers already, Lady Seren,” I said firmly.

“Have I? I really hope so, but I’m not sure...”

Her weak smile showed that she didn’t believe my words.

But self-doubt is a tricky thing. It slides in unnoticed and is extremely difficult to remove.

I have my own insecurities, too, of course. I’m expressionless. People are always questioning if I’m angry or in a bad mood. And I admit that I’m terrible at getting along with other people, at being sociable.

It’d be good if Lady Seren and I could both learn to change, bit by bit.

“One day, you’ll think so, too,” I said. “Until then, just focus on the task in front of you.”

“...Okay!”

“All right. Now get to perfecting that method you just pulled off.”

“I’ll do my best!”

Lady Seren’s eyes glittered with determination.

The look of self-doubt disappeared from her face as she focused on

pummeling the magic barrier with her own variation of the Wind Cutter spell. Her strength was still lacking, but now that she'd figured out how to up the intensity, the rest would soon follow.

I was impressed by my student. Now she was experimenting, trying all sorts of different approaches against the magic barrier. There was no need for me to speak.

I curled up on the cushion she prepared for me and watched calmly as she continued to train. Maybe I'd take this opportunity and practice my catlike grooming skills as well.

I would be busy with magical barrier duty tomorrow and the day after, so I wouldn't be able to see her for a while. The day after that was a rest day, so she'd be going on her outing with Prince Helios.

I felt a twinge in my chest again.

The dance lessons were hellish, but being able to spend a relaxing time like this made me feel like I could bear it. Without these sessions, I'd probably feel slightly depressed...no, *very* depressed.

Just like Lady Seren said yesterday...maybe everyone needs soothing now and again.

It was a new discovery for me.

Riesz 1

A Terrible Day from Start to Finish

I wandered through town until I was exhausted, only to find a man with bright red hair standing in front of my door when I got home.

There was only one nuisance I knew with hair that bright. He was standing in front of my door the other day, too. I sighed, thinking back on the annoying back and forth we had that day:



“**MASHLO...** Your foolishness never fails to astound,” I said.

“Shut it! I know already! And don’t use difficult words like that! Are you trying to mock me or something?”

I looked down at him through cold eyes as he lolled about on my bed like he owned the place. My friend with the flaming red hair was practically bawling. He’d always been a disagreeable brat, ever since we were kids. He’d grown bigger but not grown up.

“So? What’s going on?” I prompted, hoping he’d leave if I let him vent.

Apparently, he’d offended Lady Seren again after acting all salty and upset over this talk about the big outing being planned for her and the prince. I sighed a big, gusty sigh.

Mashlo had bright red hair and even redder eyes to match, which made him really stand out in a striking way. Yet here he was, bawling and blubbering like a weakling over this business with Seren. *How pathetic.* Mashlo seized my pillow and squeezed it hard as he continued his ranting.

“I mean, this whole concept of being betrothed since birth and everything, it’s hella outdated. Like...just because she’s engaged to Prince Helios, Lady Seren’s had to work herself to the brink her whole life, y’know? She’s always so frazzled over her royal training!”

“.....”

I rolled my eyes, watching him vent, all angry on Seren’s behalf. No one would ever guess that was his motive, based on how he usually acted. But I knew he’d been in deep denial about his true feelings for Seren ever since we were kids.

I actually found out more or less by coincidence, and I certainly had no intention of attempting to cheer him on. His attitude toward Seren was all about putting up a front to hide his blushes. I found it unseemly. In my opinion, he deserved what he got.

“Hmm...still, I have to say I agree with you about this concept of arranged marriages being outdated,” I agreed with him on that point. “These days, almost everyone marries for love. Only the prince—the one who’ll shoulder the burden of the kingdom— has a prearranged betrothed.”

“Right? I mean, I think so too! Poor Seren!”

If only he could really be honest with himself about how he felt. What an unfortunate fellow he is.

Incidentally, I’ve also always had a soft spot for Lady Seren. If she weren’t the prince’s betrothed, I would have made an earnest bid for her affections myself.

I’ve always made an effort to be chatty with her and make sure she notices how good I am at my work. I’m always finding things for us to talk about together. My plan was to get on good terms with her and stay there so that if, by some chance, she became available, I’d be in a favorable position to swoop in and make my move.

At the very least, I’d have more of a shot than Mashlo with all his clumsy blundering about, hurting her feelings as he went.

“My brother said it’s an anachronism,” I continued. “Soon, this whole practice of arranged marriages will die out and be left in the past. I mean, most of the citizens think so, don’t they? Save for a few old-fashioned aristocrats who stubbornly uphold the old traditions.”

“Your brother? You mean Prime Minister Borden? Everyone says he’s sharp and perceptive. Why doesn’t he go ahead and push for reform? He could do it, couldn’t he?”

“He’s not going to do that. He thinks Seren is marvelous. He wants her as queen someday. In fact, he admitted he wants them to get married as soon as possible so they can start ruling together.”

“Curse it!” Mashlo cried. “Why can’t Prince Helios just go and lose his head over another girl?”

“That’s why you keep pushing for Marietta, isn’t it? I thought all your friends were crazy about her. What’re you *thinking*, trying to get the prince to see her appeal?”

“Oh, they worship her, sure. But they see her more like a mascot. They want her to keep on shining for the sake of the country. I don’t think Marietta is interested, either.”



...**THE** last time he came over, his rant had taken up two hours of my time. I’d been forced to listen to his nonsense for *two* long hours. Every time this guy came to my place, it was nothing but a headache to me. How I wished he’d cease and desist.

And today I was especially tired, in both mind and body. Today of all days, I *really* didn’t need this. But how could I avoid him? He was blocking my door.

“Mashlo...did you come here for something?” I asked him crabbily and he spun toward me. For some reason, his eyes narrowed as he responded flatly.

“I wouldn’t come here if I didn’t have something to discuss.”

“If you say so... So, what is it?”

“Let me in.”

“What? We can’t talk out here? I’m seriously tired today, you know?”

I didn’t have enough energy left to handle him today. But as soon as I spoke, his brows came down, and he started scowling at me. A tense smile distorted his lips.

Whoah, kinda scary. What’s with you, man?

“You must be tired. Heard you went out with Prince Helios today, right? Sere

—”

“All right! All right, already!”

Where did he hear that? I’d asked Prince Helios to keep it in the strictest confidence!

I shoved Mashlo into my room and firmly locked the door behind us.

“Good, let’s do this inside,” he snarled. “Now you’re going to tell me everything. You were helping him plan out his date with Seren, weren’t you? Doing a dry run of the whole event, weren’t you? I know all about it.”

“Where’d you hear about that?” I asked.

“Who cares about that?! Spit it out! What kind of advice did you give Prince Helios?”

Mashlo had grabbed the front of my shirt. I knocked his arms aside, fixing him with a glare.

“What’s your plan if I tell you?”

“I’m gonna interfere, of course!”

“Hmph...”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Mashlo’s eyes were filled with tears. *Hmm. He always was such a big crybaby.*

As I looked at his pitiful face, I started to feel like maybe I *should* tell him. After all, it’s not like he could really do anything, even if I *did* tell him. The only real fire this guy had about him was confined to his hair and eyes.

I sighed and sat down on the chair. Then I cast my mind back on my outing with the prince and the course we devised for his date with Seren. *Hmm, I can’t really foresee any major issues. Should be all right.*

As I told him all about it, Mashlo’s face darkened by degrees. Finally, he flung himself on the bed and started whining again. “Curse you...” he muttered. “That’s an amazing date plan. Seren’s gonna be over the moon, you *do* realize that, don’t you? Damnit!”

“*Obviously*, the goal is for her to enjoy the date. Don’t be such a dimwit,

Mashlo.”

“How *could* you?! When you know that I’m in love with Seren! Can’t you try to think about *my* feelings, just a little?”

Give me a break! Do you have any idea how it felt for me when the prince came seeking my advice? My shoulder devil and shoulder angel seriously duked it out. It was brutal.

The shoulder angel was telling me to recommend cute places that Lady Seren would love. Meanwhile, the shoulder devil was saying, “You really want to lend your rival a helping hand? You should purposefully point him toward tacky boutiques that sell only gaudy clothes and recommend cafes and restaurants that look fancy but have only bland-tasting food.”

Now me being a reasonable man—a man of logic—I had to rein them both in. I was the one who had to make the bitter decisions in the end. Never mind putting aside Mashlo’s feelings, I had to betray my own, as well.

“As I keep *telling* you, I have no intention of indulging your feelings.”

“That’s ice-cold, man. You know, you’re the only one in the world who knows how I feel, and you act like *this*?”

Still blubbering, Mashlo thrashed about on top of my comforter. I got up from my chair and leaped over him, plonking myself down on the empty space still left on my bed.

“Shoo now! I’ve told you everything, so please leave. Ah, man! You’ve messed up my pillow again! How many times have I asked you not to blub on my bed?”

“Damnit! Damn you! You don’t understand how I feel!”

I understand better than anyone! In fact, this bothers me even more than it does you, I bet. I just don’t ever admit it out loud. Do you have any idea how it feels to suffer this in silence, hmm? I’m the one who wants to curl up with my tear-stained pillow and cry myself to sleep.

Come tomorrow, the prince would be enjoying a happy time with Lady Seren, taking her to all the spots I’d recommended. Just picturing the two of them smiling together made my heart burn with jealousy and envy.

“Dang it. Must be nice. What I’d give to be Prince Helios...”

Me too, buddy.

“Wish I could be the one taking Seren on a date...”

“I hear ya...”

Oops, I didn’t mean to agree with him out loud!

I looked at Mashlo in alarm, but he didn’t seem to have noticed what I’d said. He was still muttering to himself. It was good that he hadn’t noticed. *But where does he get off ignoring me, hmm?!*

“That’s enough! Get out, will you?” Steaming mad now, I pushed Mashlo off the bed.

He walked to the door, rubbing his butt. *Probably bruised it when he fell.* I watched him go. Then I thought about what my brother said.

“Oh, one thing, Mashlo,” I called out to him before he left. “I’ve got a message from my brother for you four. He said, ‘Take care of your assigned work duties by yourselves.’ You know what that means, right?”

“Ack! Seriously...? He doesn’t miss a trick, does he?”

“No, he does not. If you continue like this, sooner or later, you’ll end up having to answer to the common class, you know?” I warned.

“Tch...”

Clucking his tongue in annoyance, Mashlo finally left without another word.

I was the one who had the right to cluck. I was mad. I’d warned him. But he’d shown no signs of remorse. Another two or three years of this behavior, and he’d end up relegated to a desk to push papers and do pointless busywork for the rest of his career.

Our kingdom’s basically under monarchy rule, but it works on a merit-based system. If you’ve got skill, then any commoner can go on to become a civil official or knight or mage. Conversely, if you’ve got no skill then, even if you were born to the aristocracy, you’ll find yourself starting to sink in life. I could see my friend going down that path and it made me sigh.

After imposing on me in my own room and forcing me to listen to his whining and blubbering, he left without even a word of thanks. And he didn't even close the door behind him. *What a rude fellow.*

I shook my head, wanting to rid my mind of all further thoughts of Mashlo.

It was no good. No good wasting time thinking dark thoughts about Mashlo or about Prince Helios. These private moments were reserved for an oasis of the mind: precious time I could spend thinking about Seren.

I found her sudden interest in magic most fascinating. I was delighted to realize that now we had even more in common to talk about than before, certainly more than any other guy had with her. And just seeing the rapid progress she was making daily with her magic...got me all fired up.

I've never seen such advancement, not even at the Magic Academy. Just what kind of magic is Lord Viol casting? My brother's a friend of his. No doubt he'll know the particulars.

"...That's it."

Come the next rest day, I'd go and visit my brother and see what I could find out.

Seren 5

A Dreamlike Time with the Prince

MOTIVATED by Vi's compliments, I spent all of the next day and the day after on my rejuvenation magic, specifically on keeping unbroken concentration. After all, the next time I'd see Vi was going to be on Voidday evening, my day off. I wanted to have the rejuvenation spell perfected by then.

Besides, practicing this spell would pay off in the future, not only with casting barrier magic, but with all sorts of offensive spells. No doubt I'd get tons of ideas that I could apply going forward as well.

The more pressing thing on my mind, though, was that Voidday was the day Prince Helios and I would have our special outing. I tried to focus only on my magic, but my thoughts kept wandering, and I kept being overcome by fits of anxiety and self-consciousness. I was a mess.

Now the big day was tomorrow, and my heart kept skipping beats all over the place. I had no idea what we were supposed to talk about. Would the clothes I'd picked out be too showy for a walk in the town? Conversely, would they be too subdued for watching a live performance? Had I picked the right thing to wear after all? My mind was filled with whirling doubts, which I knew no amount of agonizing over would help, but I really couldn't relax at all.

It's amazing, really, that I could keep my rejuvenation spell unbroken under mental circumstances like these.

Oh dear! I'm so nervous... Someone help!

I kept wringing my hands together unconsciously, fidgeting and squirming. When I realized what I was doing, I had to laugh at myself. I needed to get my head on straight and focus on magic. I flipped through my notebook in an attempt to focus, and my eye was drawn to a certain heading.

Ah, that's right! I was wondering about that part...

According to the texts, the rejuvenation spell could be used to concentrate magic on one specific area when cast continuously. So, while the entire body could be rejuvenated, it was also possible to, for example, focus its effects on sore muscles or stiff shoulders...any problem areas, really. By concentrating hard, you could actually use it to heal yourself.

I was certain this technique would pay off when it came to casting defensive magic as well. I could, for example, preemptively strengthen vulnerable body parts, the ones that seemed most likely to be attacked. That way, I could defend myself and attack my enemy at the same time.

Hmm, it says here to focus one's energy on the affected body part... It's hard to visualize. But maybe if I try what it says...to try to concentrate the flow, almost like stopping up a dam and blocking a flow of water... Hmm, I guess magic really does depend a lot on the caster's ability to visualize the results.

I tried blocking the spell flow around my shoulders without letting my concentration drop, but I felt like I didn't have enough energy output going on to make it really work. Not that I needed high output for my rejuvenation spell, in particular. But casting protective magic, that was a whole different story.

I thought hard for a while. Eventually, I sighed and closed my eyes.

I couldn't visualize it...

No doubt my mind was too stuffed with thoughts of tomorrow's date to really concentrate. I thought I'd made great strides in concentration, but right now, I felt like I had hit a mental blockade.

I'm not going to get anything done today at this rate...

In the end, I never did make any sort of breakthrough. Instead, I was reminded of how mentally weak I still was.



THE day I was meant to go on my outing with Prince Helios was finally here. I awoke refreshed as usual, but when I sat up, my heart started to race a mile a minute.

With me being so nervous, you would think I hadn't gotten a wink of sleep

last night, but actually, I had gotten into the habit of using the trick I'd learned: exhausting my magic power to fully recharge myself. My prior bouts of insomnia seemed like a half-forgotten dream now.

"You know, Lady Seren...your hair and skin are really glowing these days."

My maid, Rince, gave me this smiling compliment as she styled my hair. Actually, I had noticed that my hair and skin were looking good. It had to be because of all the sleep I'd been getting. I had only been using my recharging trick for the past ten days, but my appearance really *had* gotten a big boost in just that time. I was still hopelessly plain, of course. But in my own way, I'd never looked better.

"It must be because I've been sleeping so much," I replied.

"Or it's because your bridal training's calmed down a little, and you've finally been able to get some decent sleep at night. I'm so pleased."

"...Oh?"

Rince always twisted my hair up into tight buns. But today, for some reason, she put my hair into braids on either side of my head, with the rest kept loose and wavy as it cascaded down my back.

"You're not twisting my hair up today?"

"Not today! I always tie your hair back tightly so you can concentrate on your studies. But today, you're going on a date! I'm giving you a lovely hairstyle for a special occasion."

"A d-date..."

Come to think of it, this *was* a date. I felt myself blushing.

"See how pretty and eye-catching your hair looks? We want it flowing just like that! And I'll also apply a touch of makeup to enhance that translucent skin! Oh! And a dash of lip gloss plumps up those lips and makes them look like two innocent, unplucked cherries!"

Rince explained what she was doing to my face with obvious excitement. Perhaps she'd been waiting for an opportunity just like this for a long time.

"Now, it's clear gloss of course! So you won't need to worry too much when

eating and drinking.”

“Th-Thank you...”

“Oh, you look absolutely beautiful! The picture of loveliness and innocence! How blessed am I to be your maid, Lady Seren! Now go on your date, have a magical time, and be confident!”

She’s really laying it on thick with the compliments and encouragement. But I felt blessed, too, to have such a kind maid attending to me. All right! I’ll do my best to enjoy today, if for no other reason than to make sure that Rince’s efforts aren’t for nothing!



WHEN Prince Helios came at the stroke of 10 o’clock as promised, he looked...*extremely* dashing!

He was usually always wearing the academy uniform, which looked very good on him with his short, golden hair. But today, his slender form was impeccably dressed in a deep-navy suit and he looked wonderful.

While I was staring at him, unable to help myself, I heard Rince behind me. “Lady Seren,” she said softly, gently touching my back.

I jumped, realizing what I was doing. Then I took several tentative, tottering steps toward Prince Helios.

He lifted his eyes to mine and time seemed to stand still for a moment. Either that or he stiffened up. I felt my lips curve into a smile. This was the first time he and I had met like this. Perhaps he felt just as unsure as I did right now.

The thought made me feel a lot better. I’d never been more nervous in my life. But maybe it was the same for him.

“Your Highness...thank you for inviting me out today.”

As I spoke, Prince Helios drew a shaky breath. He looked away for a second before focusing his gaze on me and giving me a warm smile.

“Seren, you look very...different today. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“My maid Rince put in a lot of effort, since I’m going on an outing with you

today, Your Highness.”

“You look lovely...I mean, uh, very beautiful.”

“Thank... Thank you.”

I was delighted to hear Prince Helios calling me things like “lovely” and “beautiful” for the first time. I couldn’t help smiling.

It was just pleasantries, no doubt. But then again, Rince really *did* outdo herself getting me prepared today. At the very least, I knew I looked much prettier than I normally did. So I accepted the compliment with grace. I wanted to feel beautiful and confident as I walked alongside him.

“You look splendid too, Your Highness. I often see you dressed in deep navy at parties. I always think to myself how well it offsets your golden hair.”

“Thank you. Actually, I’m not very used to being in town, so I wasn’t sure what I should wear.”

“Hehe, I had the same concerns.”

The bashful smile Prince Helios shot me helped to melt away the last of my anxiety.

“But today, we’re going lowkey. It seems a shame after the nice compliment you just paid me. But I have to wear this.” Prince Helios produced a short-brimmed hat and covered his golden hair up with it. It *seemed a shame, but the hat looked* dapper on him.

It seems to me that those blessed with natural good looks can make anything look stylish. I’ve often had that thought when looking at Marietta.

“My hair tends to stand out, so the hat’s sort of an insurance policy.”

Prince Helios chuckled and I giggled along. *I’ve often wished for beauty, but I suppose it does have its drawbacks.*

“Well, the hat looks great on you.”

“Does it? Oh good. Well then, shall we go?”

He offered me his hand and escorted me to the carriage. He’d taken my hand at dances before, but today, I couldn’t help noticing how warm his hand felt

around mine. The thought made my heart grow warm.

Our short ride into town passed swiftly, with us making pleasant small talk.

Once in town, Prince Helios took me straight to a wonderful but very unusual shop, with so many books and all kinds of adorable stationery and writing tools.

“This is amazing...!” I cried with glee.

Colorful notebooks and bookmarks with fine gold engraving, elegant book covers made of lace, pots of ink in colors I’d never even seen before... Just looking around the shop made my heart want to dance.

Beyond the stationery were shelves of all kinds of books...so many books! The ones in the front seemed like recent publications, but if I wasn’t mistaken, the ones further back looked like magic texts. After all, the customers who were solemnly gazing up at the bookshelves were all dressed in robes.

But I wasn’t here today to browse for magic books. Perhaps if I could make some time next weekend, I could come back to this shop on my own.

I had no idea there were such wonderful shops to be found in town.

Prince Helios seemed to be a stationery fan as well. He examined, with interest, leather-bound notebooks and belts designed to carry multiple books at once. For my part, I was also utterly charmed and kept exclaiming over every new lovely thing I saw.

Surrounded by all these wonderful things and spending a dreamlike time with Prince Helios...the hour passed swiftly. Luckily my sense of nerves and the rapidly pounding heartbeat I’d initially suffered had really calmed down by now. I was just happy to be having such a lovely time.

I looked around, eyes wide and sparkling with wonder, and that’s when I caught sight of something truly special, my feet shuffling to a halt as I stared.

The display case was filled with colorful pens made of slender tubes of glass. The colorful glass tubes were beautiful enough, but the ink reservoirs inside were also fascinating to look at. Even the nibs were delicately crafted.

They even came with glass pen holders, too. Or were they more like a sort of ink holder? The light shone through the colored ink, illuminating it in a most

aesthetic way.

“Do you like those?”

I jumped, surprised by Prince Helios’ voice. *Oh dear, I must’ve been staring.*

“Oh, yes. The way the light shines through the glass is just stunning... It’s amazing how they can take a useful item and turn it into a work of art. With a pen like that, writing would be so much more fun.”

“They are very pretty.” Prince Helios nodded in agreement, then peered more closely at the display case, his voice rising in surprise. “Interesting. This pen stand has an ink reservoir in it. What a nifty idea...”

“Oh yes, doesn’t it look so convenient and easy to use?”

“I thought ink was stored at the end of the pen, but it looks like it sucks it up from this reservoir. *Ah*, yes! It says here the pen holds a good deal of ink.”

“Where?”

“Look, right here.”

Prince Helios pointed to a small information card that explained the pen’s various features. I was so distracted by the item’s beauty, I hadn’t noticed the card at all.

“Each one is handmade, it says,” he went on. “Wow, we’re lucky to have artisans so skilled as to be able to craft such delicate pens as these. No doubt they have the artistry but also have a real vision to come up with something like this.”

“I agree,” I said, smiling.

Prince Helios looked really happy. He was proud of our kingdom and our skilled artisans. That much was plain to see.

As I stood beside Prince Helios, who continued to gaze at the pens, I felt a sense of kinship with him, a feeling that made my heart glad. We found the same things beautiful.

“Seren...”

“Yes?”

He spoke my name in a low voice and I turned to look at him beside me. Our eyes met and I noticed a look of slight embarrassment on his face.

“I was wondering if you’d allow me to gift you one of these splendid pens as a memento of today? See, there are so many colors available. I’m sure one of them would be to your liking.”

“What...?”

“Please say yes! I insist.”

As I hesitated, Prince Helios insisted. His expression was so kind... I hesitated, wondering if it was all right for me to accept this. But then I decided to say yes and receive his gift with gratitude and grace.

“Prince Helios, you are too kind! Thank you very much!”

As I thanked him, Prince Helios’s smile grew bigger and bigger. I couldn’t help smiling right back at him.

A special present from Prince Helios himself!

I deliberated over the various colors of pen on offer. I wanted to pick a color that represented today so that I’d always be able to remember it. After all, it was probably going to be the first and last happy day like this that I would ever have.

Prince Helios waited patiently with a warm smile, watching as I picked up each pen one by one and examined it.

Those eyes... In a few more months, I would lose all opportunity to look into those eyes up close. As that miserable thought crossed my mind, I reached out and grabbed a pen at random.

“I’ll take...this one.”

I picked up a purple pen, the same hue as Prince Helios’s eyes. In the light, it looked bluish-purple, just like how his eyes changed colors in the light. Whenever I thought of this day, I knew I’d feel happy but also sad...the two feelings would be inextricably intertwined. I wanted a pen that represented that dichotomy.

“All right. Let’s take that one then.” Prince Helios took the purple pen from

my hand and looked at it a moment, smiling bashfully.

“This is a little bit nerve-wracking, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why not? Maybe I should buy a matching one as well.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea to me. It’s a really splendid pen.”

“Would you like to make a purchase?”

While we stood there clutching our pens and smiling at one another, the shopkeeper suddenly addressed us. No doubt he’d been waiting for just the right opportunity to attend to his customers.

“Yes. We’ll take two of these glass pens. This purple one is a gift from me to the lady.”

“Certainly.”

“And I think I’ll take...this amber-colored one.”

My breath caught in my throat. Prince Helios had to have noticed that I chose a pen color that matched his eye color. In turn, he had chosen a pen with amber ink to represent my eye color.

I was so happy!

But I felt so wretched at the same time.

But then again, I was so happy!

My feelings came in waves, crushing me. I never dreamed that Prince Helios would be so sweet and considerate. This pen would become one of my lifelong treasures. I just knew it.

I clutched the beautifully gift-wrapped pen to my chest as we walked briskly to the shop’s exit.

“We used up quite a chunk of time. We better hurry to the restaurant, or we’ll miss the reservation.”

“Everything has been so wonderful... I feel like I’m in a dream.”

“I intended to take you around all sorts of other shops, too. I’m sorry I

couldn't."

"Oh, please don't apologize. I'm completely happy and satisfied! And you gave me such a wonderful present. Oh! And I found an absolutely wonderful shop that I never even knew about before! I'm really, really happy!"

"I see. I guess I owe Riesz a debt of thanks, then."

"Pardon?"

As we hurried along the street, Prince Helios brought up a name I hadn't been expecting to hear.

"...Riesz?"

"Yes. Embarrassed as I am to admit it, I don't know much about the shops in town. So I asked Riesz for his advice. The stationery shop was actually his suggestion. He's got good taste, hasn't he?"

"Oh, I see... That was nice of him."

Not only that, it sounded like Riesz had given Prince Helios an extensive itinerary of shops to take me to today. They all sounded like places I'd love to go to, but just hearing about them was more than thrilling enough.

And how sweet of Prince Helios to take the time to plan all this out just for me, even though he was very busy. Far busier than I was. Just that sentiment alone was enough to fill my heart with warmth.

And Riesz had really put in a lot of effort for me, too. I was delighted to find out about that cool stationery shop. When I saw him at the academy tomorrow, I'd have to be sure to give him my heartfelt thanks.

"Whoops..."

Prince Helios suddenly put his arm around me and drew me in tight. I'd been gazing up at him and talking a mile a minute as we walked and hadn't noticed I was about to bump into someone approaching from the opposite direction.

"I'm so sorry, I wasn't paying attention..."

I looked up at the person I'd almost bumped into, my voice trailing off into a whisper. Mashlo was standing there.

“Lord Mashlo—”

“What are you doing here?” Prince Helios interrupted me as I tried to greet Mashlo, his tone combative. He kept a protective arm around me as he turned his face toward Mashlo, rendering it impossible for me to see his expression.

Mashlo gave me an awkward look and then looked away. Then he scrunched up his face and spoke under his breath. “...I came to find a present for Marietta.”

I froze.

Oh. Oh, right. I remembered now. Prince Helios turned down Mashlo’s invitation to come into town and buy a birthday present for Marietta. He turned him down repeatedly in favor of our date instead.

I got so carried away with enjoying myself, I’d completely forgotten. It was no surprise that we might’ve bumped into Mashlo in town, since he had plans to come here too. I felt awkward and cast my eyes down to my boots.



“I see.” Prince Helios looked relieved, for some reason. Then his voice darkened in suspicion again. “Where are the others? They didn’t come with you?”

“We split up to each search individually...”

“I see. Well, good luck.”

Prince Helios relaxed his grip on me, letting me free. *Perhaps he’s feeling awkward about all this, too.*

“Seren, let’s get going. We don’t want to miss our reservation.”

Prince Helios put a gentle hand on my back. I looked up to see him smiling and nodding down at me. When I saw that soft smile and those purple eyes, I felt my spirits rise once more.

It’s all right. Prince Helios has promised today to me. All I have to do is be myself and enjoy it.

“Well, excuse us,” Prince Helios said to Mashlo. “You still have business here, right, Mashlo? That shop there has a splendid range of wares for sale. Don’t they, Seren?”

“Oh, y-yes! Oh! But Marietta prefers perfumes. Actually, she’s collecting pretty perfume bottles these days. She’d be delighted with a gift like that, I’m sure.”

For some reason, Mashlo looked like he was on the brink of tears. I wasn’t sure why I’d said that about the perfume bottles. Mashlo reddened, almost like he’d been attacked unawares.

“I... I... I know that, thanks very much!!!”

“Oh, I see. I’m very sorry. I only meant that Marietta likes streamlined glassware, so if you gave her something like that, it’d definitely resonate with her.”

“.....” Mashlo bit his lip and looked away in vexation.

“Are we done here?” Prince Helios asked me. I nodded and we made as if to walk past Mashlo. Just as we were about to pass, his head snapped up.

“What’s that...?”

Mashlo was looking at the present I was clutching to my chest, then at my face, then back at the present again. He was frowning.

Why is he making such a face?

“That?” Prince Helios said. “It’s a present I got for Seren. She seemed very taken with it, so I bought it for her as a little memento of today.”

Prince Helios looked into my eyes as he said that, and I felt myself smiling back at him. Mashlo looked like he’d been struck. I began to worry that I’d been looking at the prince in an overly sappy way.

“You won’t even come with me to choose a birthday present for Marietta! But you’ll buy Seren a present for absolutely no good reason?”

His words were cutting. I stiffened myself, expecting Prince Helios’s reaction would hurt me.

“Obviously. Seren is my fiancée. And it’s not for absolutely no good reason. It’s to commemorate our day together.”

“Prince Helios...”

“Our first outing like this together. I feel terrible that we’ve never had the opportunity before this. I *am* sorry, Seren.”

“Oh, don’t be...!”

“Let us go on many more outings like this one.” Prince Helios smiled at me and I felt like I could actually breathe. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath all this time.

“Damnit...”

Mashlo was muttering something under his breath. I took a step forward, wanting to hear better.

“Fiancée this, fiancée that. You don’t even *like* the girl...!”

“...!”

I should have never done that... His words struck me and pierced me to my core. He was right, of course. Prince Helios only favored me because we were

betrothed.

...He doesn't even really like me at all.

I tried to hold it together but began to tremble violently.

"What's that, Mashlo? If you've got something to say, just say it plainly," Prince Helios challenged him.

"No, it's nothing. Forget it. Good for you, Seren. Keep that present from your *fiancé* nice and close."

Prince Helios didn't seem to hear that last remark. *But perhaps that's for the best.*

If Prince Helios had said something like "Feelings don't matter, it's what's best for the kingdom that matters" then I might not have been able to keep from bursting into tears.

"What a jerk he is," Prince Helios said. "I can't fathom what goes on in his brain."

Prince Helios seemed disturbed by the altercation. We stood there and watched Mashlo walk off, ignoring the shop entirely. Then Prince Helios suddenly scrambled for his pocket watch.

"Goodness. We've wasted more time on nonsense. Let's go! I'd hate to keep the restaurant staff waiting."

"Okay," I answered him briefly, clutching his present tightly to my chest.

There was no point in overthinking things.

Today was the only day I'd ever have...the only chance I'd ever get to spend real quality time with Prince Helios. And I'd already made up my mind to enjoy it.

Viol 5

How Did Today Go?

THIS week, I was planning to spend the weekend relaxing until nightfall. But the world is never that kind.

Even though it was a day off, I spent the whole day dancing.

I was feeling refreshed at first, despite yesterday's barrier duty, thanks to my rejuvenating spell trick, but dancing all day without even a lunch break had me feeling exhausted again in no time.

My partner today was the real cause of my troubles. Count Blaze was an absolute perfectionist.

"With me as your teacher, the shame will be on me if you show up to the party and dance an ungainly waltz." So said Blaze, as he sacrificed his own precious day off to put me through his hellish training.

Still, Blaze knew that I was the Archmage of an entire mage guild, so whenever I seemed about to give up, he suggested rejuvenating, healing, and strengthening spells to keep me going.

Unable to fall back on excuses like blistered feet, I was able to push through the dance session, even though I felt like bursting into tears.

"You've finally managed to reach a decent level of skill. At this rate, you will be able to dance a waltz that won't shame me to my core come next week."

"Thank...you..." I managed to say.

The sun was setting by the time my hellish dance practice finally ended.

But would I really be able to pull off a respectable waltz with this piddly amount of practice? *Dance is a complex discipline*, I thought. *Mastering a new spell is typically impossible in just a few weeks, so I shouldn't expect dance to come faster than that.*

My request had been an extreme one. I was grateful to my dance teacher for taking me on and basically getting me to where I needed to be.

I wiped my brow and then bowed deeply to Count Blaze in a show of gratitude.

“Count Blaze, thank you for indulging my rather extreme request. I hope to rely on your continued instruction in the days to come.”

“Ah, very good. Fighting words. You looked about to faint just before. But I must admit...I’m looking forward to next week’s ball!”

Count Blaze gave me a warm smile, his severe expression now absent. Once he had discovered I planned to dance with Seren, he had stepped up his demon teaching to even more fearsome levels. I was grateful to him, but I couldn’t take much more than this.

I thanked him again then hurried home. I had plans to visit Lady Seren at the stroke of nine o’clock. First, I needed to eat dinner and take a bath. I had less time available to me than I’d thought.

Incidentally, today was the day Lady Seren was meant to have gone on her date with Prince Helios.

I wonder if she had a good time?

Now that she’d had an opportunity to have some alone time with Prince Helios, perhaps she’d even change her mind about becoming a High Mage. It was possible that she’d announce the whole thing was over.

I wanted to know how it went. But I was also afraid to know. It was a strange feeling.

“.....”

I shook my head and hurried in to take a bath. There was no point wasting time pondering such things. I’d find out when I saw her.

I tried very hard to empty my mind as I splashed hot water over my head.



“VI!”

I hopped up onto the windowsill and Lady Seren came running over to me.

“I’ve been dying to see you!”

She whipped the window open and scooped me up in a hug. Then, still holding me, she sat down and began to wipe my feet with a practiced air.

For my part, I made no protest. I’d grown very good at going limp and simply enduring it like a real cat.

“How did today go?” I asked.

“Oh, it was so much fun. Prince Helios was so kind. And the performance was amazing. The songs really moved me. Oh! And the food was very delicious...”

“I see. Good for you.”

Despite her gushing, she seemed somewhat internally subdued. I scrutinized her face as she continued to wipe my feet.

“What is it?”

She was smiling, yet her eyes looked sad.

“You don’t seem completely happy.”

“Aw, you’re concerned about my happiness? You’re so sweet, Vi.”

She squeezed me again and I realized she was being even more tactile than usual. This increased my concern. She was clearly holding something back. If her date with Prince Helios really *had* gone so well, then my suspicions must’ve been right.

Nervously, I decided to ask her.

“I was wondering if you might want to quit trying to become a High Mage if your date went well. I understand it may be difficult to admit, but it’s ok—”

“Absolutely not!”

“Whoa!”

Lady Seren yelled with such vigor that I was almost blasted away. My tail and ears stood on end. I was annoyed that my cat body had given away my shock so obviously.

“My feelings haven’t changed in the slightest. In fact, they’ve only gotten stronger!”

“I... I see. But are you sure? No doubts left?”

“Completely sure! I even got a splendid present that I can keep as a reminder of the past. I’m totally ready to move on now!”

Lady Seren gestured toward a glass pen I hadn’t seen before. It was very nicely shaped, with purple swirled glass, and was clearly handcrafted, right down to the nib. A very splendid piece, indeed.

“Isn’t it gorgeous? He bought it for me as a memento of today, he said.”

“It’s splendid. But why do you have it on the highest shelf? You won’t be able to reach it to write with.”

“It’s okay, I don’t plan to actually use it. I’m planning to keep it pristine so I can go and look at it when I feel the need to.”

“Ah... I see.”

I had a feeling there was more being left unsaid, but I decided not to pry. At any rate, it was better up there out of the way. Otherwise, it might distract Lady Seren in her daily life.

Oh dear, what am I thinking?

I squirmed slightly and Lady Seren released me at once. We’d learned to read each other’s body language by now. She was careful to respect my need for bodily autonomy whenever I hinted at a desire to be free.

I hopped from her lap to the table and stretched myself out before I turned to her again.

“If your plans haven’t changed, then we should get right back to business. We don’t have much time today, after all.”

“Yes. Wind Cutter again today, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

I cast the barrier spell and Lady Seren began charging her magic.

Her Wind Cutter was now to the point where she could discharge fifteen

blades at once. That was a clear improvement, and the swooshing sound had grown in volume and intensity, too. That was proof her speed had increased as well. At this rate, her ability to inflict damage would no doubt increase at a rapid pace.

“Wonderful. You’ve improved yet again.”

“I can’t practice Wind Cutter without you, Vi, but I’ve been practicing altering the thickness of my rejuvenation spell’s ‘skin’ and working on increasing my casting speed as well. The skills are surprisingly transferable, so it’s actually helped a lot with the offensive magic as well!”

Lady Seren looked so pleased with herself. I couldn’t suppress a wry grin.

I sat on a cushion and watched as Lady Seren demonstrated a wonderful Wind Cutter, honed by self-practice. I began to debate with myself when the time would be right for me to teach her defensive magic.

She’d need to learn to cast defensive magic at some point.

In the worst-case scenario, a well-cast defensive spell can save your life even if your attacks fail. You can ride out the battle. It’s not a very efficient method, though.

I wanted to teach it to her as soon as possible, but on the other hand, high-level protective magic consisted of both boundary spells and barrier wall spells. The boundary spell was the bigger issue. Still, Lady Seren had done much independent study with books and had already advanced to a high level.

Hmm, what to do? Perhaps I should wait just a little longer before starting on that.

After all, Lady Seren had really only mastered the rejuvenation spell, and here she was wanting to use that experience and transfer it right to learning offensive spells.

Compared to magic used in battle, rejuvenation magic and magical barrier casting were both similar and the skills were very transferable. If she continued to polish up her rejuvenation magic, then she’d no doubt naturally show great accuracy when it came to picking up defensive magic.

Still, it'd be better for her to master Wind Cutter and rejuvenation first, before starting on barriers. That would give her a solid foundation on which to build the rest.

I was still thinking about that when...

"Gah!"

Lady Seren grunted, just as...

SHOOM!

With a sound like a sonic boom, knives made of pure wind went flying. They rocketed toward the magic barrier almost faster than the eye could see.

"Yeek!"

Lady Seren went shooting backward, landing heavily on her bottom.

What...? What just happened...?

An unbelievable number of wind knives were just released, weren't they?!

Until this point, Lady Seren's wind knives had flown one after another, like a meteor shower of steel. What was this sudden development? Most mages, when casting Wind Cutter, would release bunches of blades in tandem. But this time, her spell had been unlike anything I had seen before.

"Ouch..."

Lady Seren's moan snapped me back to the moment, and I dove off the table and ran to her side. She didn't seem to have been badly injured, luckily. But in my cat form, I could do little in the way of first aid.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I think my attack was a little over the top, that's all. ...Huh? Oh, it doesn't hurt anymore."

"I cast a quick rejuvenation spell."

"Oh, thanks. Wow, you use magic as easy as breathing, don't you, Vi?"

Lady Seren got to her feet, chuckling. Then she patted her dress down, checking for rips. She looked fine to me.

“Lady Seren, what was that? The blades all seemed to fly simultaneously.”

“I felt I wasn’t doing it strong enough, so I changed up my approach. Until now, I’ve been focusing on dropping each blade down from above.”

“Yes, you mentioned that. It was a handy method. I was impressed.”

“Thanks. Anyway, this time I thought that if I imagined a row of blades, like the teeth of a comb, and sent them flying at once, that might work even better.”

“It’s impressive you thought of that.”

“I thought it might work better if I envisioned the blades being flung forward as if released from a bow, rather than just shooting through the air.”

Apparently, the spell was much more effective than she’d been expecting, which was what led to her being flung backward.

But still...

“It needs refinement, but I think I’ve hit on a great idea here.”

“Indeed.”

If I wasn’t careful, the girl would end up surpassing me. Compared to me, with all my fumbling about on the dance floor, Lady Seren was making huge strides. I was almost envious of her.

“What’s wrong, Vi? Your tail is sticking straight out. Have I done something I shouldn’t have...?”

“No, no. Ah...my master was complaining that dance practice wasn’t going so well. I was just thinking that if only he could learn to dance as quickly as you’re mastering magic, well...he’d have no cause to complain anymore.”

I ended up speaking the truth and Lady Seren’s eyes grew wide. Then she began to giggle, clearly amused.

“So even Lord Viol has stuff he’s not good at,” she mused.

“He is only good at magic.”

“I’m surprised to hear that. But if he’s practicing dance, does that mean I’m going to be able to see him dance at the upcoming ball?”

“Perhaps.”

*You’ll see him, up close...*is what I refrained from saying.

“I can’t wait for that. I bet he’ll look splendid dancing.”

I’m so sorry, Lady Seren. I shall try my best not to disappoint you too terribly.

We continued our session and I decided we’d spend the rest of it working only on Wind Cutter. Lady Seren really had devised a most fascinating methodology for the spell.

But perfectly visualized magic wasn’t much use if the quality of the resulting spell wasn’t where it needed to be. It wasn’t just about showy flashes and bangs, you needed to really get a physical grasp on the spell.

Wind Cutter was an elementary-level spell, but she was already able to conjure multiple blades. No doubt mid-level spells would be within her reach as well. Normally, a student of her level wouldn’t have been able to gather the necessary mental concentration for this.

But Lady Seren was not your average student.

She’d plenty of AA ranked magic. If she could bring the required focus, then I’d put her at SS rank, easy. She’d already mastered the Wind Cutter spell to extraordinary effect.

For my part, I curled up on my cushion and watched over Lady Seren as she worked.

It felt good to rest, but I was so sleepy. I’d been dancing since sunup, after all, enduring barked orders and criticisms the whole time. I was mentally spent.

I started to nod off but caught myself.

My eyelids began to droop again and I jerked.

Lady Seren noticed and let out a sunny giggle.

“You look so tired, Vi. Your ears and tail are drooping.”

“Sorry...”

Lady Seren booped me on the nose as I sat there swaying and giggled again. “It’s okay. It’s almost time to wrap things up anyway. But...ah, I wonder...”

“What?” I asked.

“I prepared a sweet cheese tart for today! Do you have enough energy to eat?”

“Obviously!”

I leaped to my feet. *A sweet cheese tart! I refuse to sleep until I’ve procured such a delicacy and scoffed it down!*

“Hehe, oh, good! Look, it’s got cheese dust sprinkled on top just like snow! It’s really creamy as well. I just knew I wanted you to try it.”

It looks incredible!!!

Lady Seren picked up a slice of sweet cheese tart as thick as strawberry shortcake and broke it up into little pieces so I could eat it easily.

The scent of the cream cheese was driving me mad.

I took a big bite and the creaminess of the cheese filled my mouth with a sharp, sweet, tangy flavor. Its scent permeated my nose as I rolled the creamy mouthful over my tongue. The cookie tart base was also divine. Its crisp bite contrasted with the smooth texture of the cream cheese.

The duke’s pâtissier is a genius! A visionary!

“Is it good?”

Lady Seren smiled, peering at me. I nodded vigorously, too distracted by the marvelous cheese tart to even speak.



THE next day and the day after were a hellscape, so bad that the lovely time I had spent in Lady Seren’s chambers seemed like a distant dream.

I did my Mage Guild duties. Then, when the chime rang for my dance practice, I was dragged off by Count Blaze. By the time I made it to Lady Seren’s chamber again at the stroke of nine o’clock, I was famished, since I’d no time for dinner.

Lady Seren was such an industrious student, I felt no guilt in sitting back and simply watching. I was really tired. The dance lessons made barrier duty seem like easy street. *Who’d have thought?*

Once the following Voidday—the day of the ball—came, I would finally be released from the hell of daily dance practice. That made me feel somewhat emotional.

Of course, I was grateful to Count Blaze.

The academy was closed on Voidday, so usually I'd be joining Lady Seren for her training, but we had decided not to squish it into this day. After all, she needed to prepare for the ball. Hair curling, skin treatment, nail care, makeup, corsets, and so on. I'd heard that ladies needed a lot of time to get ready.

I, on the other hand, could be ready in about an hour. I owned only one good suit, so I put that on. Then I tied my hair back at the base of my neck to prevent it from getting in the way while dancing. Then I was ready.

I arrived at the ball venue and checked in before heading into the foyer for the first time in a very long while. I could hear the sounds of revelry spilling out from the open doors. Tonight's ball seemed to be another lively affair.

I looked around casually. The brightly colored dresses worn by the ladies filled the ballroom with color. Everyone was laughing and chattering. It was no different from any of the other balls I'd been to.

I went through the doors and entered the ballroom. That's when people started to notice me. *It's always this way whenever I make an appearance. Since I don't come often, people make a fuss when I do and gossip amongst themselves. If I allowed it to bother me, I'd be defeated.*

Smiling politely at the people who called out to me, I made my way to the middle of the dance floor.

The ball had only really just begun. I wanted to maneuver myself into a position where I could see Lady Seren before the actual dancing started. I made my way through the throng just as the quadrille began to play, signaling the start of the evening dances.

The first dance was customarily danced only by the most esteemed couples among the invited guests. Once that was over, everyone else would be free to join in. Lady Seren was Prince Helios's betrothed, so obviously, the two of them would dance the next dance after the quadrille. I made my way to a spot near

the center of the ballroom and then hesitated.

So many people, all around me.

I've always hated crowds, and I already felt like I'd had enough of this one. There had to be three hundred people here tonight. Locating Lady Seren in all this seemed a mammoth task.

If only I knew what color dress she was planning to wear, that'd narrow it down. I should've asked.

I looked this way and that, searching for a glimpse of Lady Seren as the quadrille came to an end. Everyone suddenly seemed to find a partner simply by making eye contact with one another, and the music for the second dance began to play.

"It's unusual for you to make an appearance, Lord Viol."

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance?"

"Do you have a dance partner in mind already?"

People were talking to me. I wasn't sure how to fend them off. Where was Lady Seren? If she was dancing with Prince Helios, the two were sure to stand out. But I saw no sign.

I scrutinized the faces of the couples who swirled past me on the dance floor, but Lady Seren was not among them. Just as I was beginning to worry about what I was going to do, I suddenly realized something.

I recalled now that whenever I came to the balls, needing to discuss something on the sidelines with Borden, I was always sure to spot Prince Helios dancing nearby. Yes, it stood to reason the prime minister would stay in close proximity to the royals during a ball. He was right in their inner circle, after all. The chaotic middle of the dance floor was not where he was likely to be.

If I could just find Borden, that'd solve all my problems. I hurried to the back of the ballroom, and just as the second song was drawing to a close, I spotted Lady Seren and her modest smile.

...There she is.

I came to a halt.

I was charmed speechless for a moment. Lady Seren was always talking about how “drab” she thought she was, but no. She was stunning.

Today, she looked especially pretty in a deep blue dress. It wasn’t an ostentatious puffy one but more of a subdued gown. It suited her personality very well. As she danced, the skirt spun out, and her amber-colored hair wafted in the breeze in a very endearing way.

She was so pretty. Why did she have such a terribly low sense of self-esteem?

Seeing her dancing with the picture-book-perfect handsome prince wasn’t something I relished. As they gazed into each other’s eyes, he kept leaning in and saying something to her. Seeing them that way made me fizz with jealousy.

Luckily, I didn’t have to watch it for very long.

Finally, the music slowed down in tempo, and with a final smile, Lady Seren parted from Prince Helios. Her smile seemed reserved and a touch sad, so different from the joyous grins she’d shown me in my cat form. It made my heart ache to see it.

She’d spoken of moving on, but she doesn’t seem to have really done so...

Lady Seren walked past, heading to the buffet tables along the back wall. And then a new young woman came over to dance with the prince.

...Wait, isn’t that Lady Seren’s sister?!

She gave the prince a big smile as if it was completely normal for her to do so. Then, with only a few words exchanged between them, they began to dance to the next song. Lady Seren said her sister was as beautiful as a painting, and I could agree with that. She was a definite beauty, none could deny.

And her appearance tonight seemed calculated to enhance her looks. While Lady Seren dressed modestly, the younger sister was adorned with flowers and bows and jewels as if to make herself stand out as much as humanly possible.

The two of them danced together with the ease of much practice, pulling off all the steps as they chatted together. Lady Seren was smiling and chatting with some of the other young ladies and didn’t seem to be too worried about what the prince and her sister were doing.

Yes, I'd seen this kind of scene at every ball I had attended.

Prince Helios always danced with a succession of young ladies while Lady Seren stood on the sidelines, a wallflower.

"Lady Marietta looks as pretty as ever today."

"I heard the flowers she's wearing in her hair are all real, fresh blooms."

"But those are Filege flowers, aren't they? I thought they didn't bloom in this season?"

"That's the life of a duke's daughter for you."

Hmm, interesting...

So Marietta was clearly a hot topic of gossip. The aristocracy seems to love gossip, but I find it so boring, I always avoid it.

"I hope Lady Marietta dances the next dance with me."

"There's a lot of competition, but I'm ready to take my shot and risk being turned down."

Young men crowded around, watching. Marietta certainly *did* seem to be in popular demand. As soon as she departed from Prince Helios, she was surrounded by a swarm of excitable would-be suitors.

Prince Helios, too, was quickly surrounded by a gaggle of young women.

But both seemed to have the next partner decided already. They took hands and began dancing in their new, respective pairs. The others all jostled for a prime position, hoping to be next in line for the next dance.

Lady Seren, however, was standing in the eating area, chatting away. So *different from the others*. But I hoped that she would indulge me in one dance today.

All right, time to go for it!

I adjusted my suit and took some steadying breaths. Once this dance was over, I'd approach Lady Seren.

Seren 6

An Unexpected Invitation at the Ball

“HOW’S the glass pen handling?”

Prince Helios asked me this during our first dance, for which he and I were partnered as always. I smiled, gazing into his purple eyes as I answered.

“It’s *far* too nice! I haven’t been able to bring myself to use it yet.”

I wasn’t lying. No doubt, I would be able to use it with care and prevent damaging it, but I preferred not to risk it.

“It’s a beautiful pen,” he protested, “but it also writes beautifully. Please...do try it. I’ll buy you another if it doesn’t write to your satisfaction or eventually wears out.”

“Thank you. But I want to keep it pristine and admire its beauty a while longer.”

We kept dancing as we chatted.

We probably had only a few more opportunities to dance like this. Balls were held only once every month on the fifteenth. Lord Viol had said this year’s High Mage exam would be held on the seventh day of the month of Flameber. The thought made me sigh.

I hadn’t thought to ask when the exam results would be announced, but it was possible that next month’s ball would be my last. The reality of it hit me suddenly, and I gazed back up into Prince Helios’s striking purple eyes.

Soon, I would lose all opportunity to gaze at his features up close.

High Mages are treated like nobility, so I would still have the right to attend balls. But...once our engagement was formally canceled, I’d surely have no more chances to dance with Prince Helios.

We danced the same steps together month after month, so I knew them well.

Prince Helios led me with considerable skill. I was just admiring him and the moment when he abruptly looked away.

This was unusual. “Is something wrong?” I asked in a tiny voice.

I was worried that he wasn’t feeling well or something like that. Prince Helios’s shoulders lurched a bit at my question. He turned his head back toward me but kept his eyes averted.

“It’s just...you’re staring at me. Looking at me much more...boldly than you usually do. I felt a little embarrassed, that’s all.”

“O-Oh my... I’m sorry.”

I suddenly realized his ears and cheeks were tinted red. I must really *have* been staring, thinking how this would be one of the last times I’d get to see him up close. *How embarrassing.*

“You seem very...different somehow tonight, Seren.”

“Oh, yes, I guess I would. I decided to wear my hair down like I did for our outing the other day. I went with a different style of dress and makeup as well... Are they a little too flashy?”

On Rince’s recommendation, I went with a pastel dress and brighter makeup this time. And with all the sleep I’d been getting, my skin had a much healthier color than usual. Rince had suggested I switch up my outfit and makeup to complement that.

“It’s not flashy at all. You look very beautiful.”

“Oh...thank you.”

I looked down, smiling, pleased to have been complimented by Prince Helios.

I’d been doing everything I could to get our engagement called off. It was ironic that he was taking me on...dates (yes, that’s what it was) and complimenting my looks now.

A sudden doubt crossed my mind. *Why has Prince Helios changed his approach so suddenly of late?*

There was a major reason behind my own change of heart. Maybe he had

some sort of reason then, too? Maybe that was why he was doing all these things.

I looked up at him again, unable to guess what might be behind the change in him. That was when the music began to slow, signaling the end of the dance.

Oh, it's ending...

Maybe I let my disappointment show on my face. Prince Helios looked sad, too, just for a moment.

"It's a shame we must part."

That was the first time he'd ever said that in all the dances we'd shared.

Marietta materialized at his elbow then, to take my place. That had also become the custom over time.

A year and a half ago, when Marietta debuted into high society, she wasn't used to balls and didn't know what to do during the dancing. So I'd asked Prince Helios to take care of her, knowing that he'd be a gentleman, as if it was the most natural thing I could think to ask.

In our society, it's frowned upon to dance with the same partner multiple times during a ball. Prince Helios always danced with lots of young ladies during balls and was always the perfect gentleman. There was no one better I could think of to entrust with Marietta's first dance.

With his excellent lead, Marietta made a wonderful debut into society with a perfect first dance. In fact, the audience had all gasped and clapped, entranced by the sight of the two of them.

All anyone could talk about afterward was how picture-perfect they had looked together. From that night onward, Marietta always danced the second dance with Prince Helios, and the other guests all seemed to look forward to it.

Marietta was the most beautiful girl in high society. Even I thought so, and she was my little sister.

Tonight, she wore a splendid pink dress covered with beautiful flowers. Her dress was nipped in at the waist and then puffed out, like a princess' dress. It suited her hourglass figure and highlighted her best features. The layers of pink

lace were delicate and the large ribbon sash at her waist was adorable. Her accessories matched perfectly too. My sister was as beautiful as a goddess.

I don't like to wear bright or flashy clothing, and it doesn't suit me anyway. So usually, I chose a simple, slender-line dress. But today, I wore a sophisticated gown in baby blue with floral lace embellishments.

I tried to dress as well as I could and chose the best cuts and materials so as to live up to my status as a duke's daughter. But then again, I didn't have the kind of beauty Marietta had: the kind of beauty that could elevate fancy clothes.

She really was amazing. I smiled, proud of her as I chatted with my friends. But the others seemed distracted tonight. They kept glancing across the room. I followed their eyeline, curious.

"Lord...Viol..."

It *was* Lord Viol! Dressed in a black coat and tails embroidered with fine silver thread.

Pitch-black again today, huh?

I always thought he was the kind of gentleman who was as dark as midnight. But as I looked at him now, he reminded me more of a black cat.

"Lord Viol almost never appears at balls."

"He's so beautiful!"

"I love that stony face of his."

"Those cold eyes of his just seem to pierce you right through, don't they?"

I gasped Lord Viol's name without thinking because I was so surprised. But the other girls all took that as a cue to start gossiping about him. Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if they'd already noticed him and were just looking for an opening to begin talking about him.

They were right. From the side, his profile was stony-faced, and he radiated an aura of unapproachability. He looked every inch the Frosty Archmage.

...In reality, of course, he was an incredibly kind person. I knew that.

“What’s he staring at, I wonder?”

“Must be Prince Helios and Marietta dancing together...”

Now that my friends pointed it out, I realized he was staring very intently at the dancing couple. I wouldn’t be surprised if Lord Viol was entranced, just like so many others. After all, Prince Helios and my sister both looked ethereally beautiful, dancing together.

“I wonder if Lord Viol has his sights set on Lady Marietta too...”

“Well, he wouldn’t have a prayer...”

“But Lady Marietta *really* needs to get a move on and decide her own future husband, though, you know!”

Lord Viol turned our way then, almost as if he’d overheard the envious gossip. Then he and I made direct eye contact. I felt my heart skip a beat and I became inwardly flustered.

You can hardly blame me, though. After all, Lord Viol looked devastatingly handsome tonight.

When I saw him the other day, he was clad in plain robes, with his hair just as normal...not tied back smartly, just sort of hanging about his shoulders. He looked a little bit scruffy. But tonight, his tailcoat was sophisticated, his hair neatly slicked back, and he looked and carried himself like a true gentleman. *Just wonderful!*

“Ah...”

My eyes followed the contours of his chiseled cheeks down to the corners of his mouth. I think he smiled a little bit just then. A few moments ago, he’d reminded me of a black cat, but he didn’t have the telltale cat ears and tail that would telegraph his every thought like Vi had.

My heart was still beating faster than normal. As if it was...responding to his presence somehow.

“Yeek! He’s looking over here!”

“Oh, my! What should we do?”

I was unable to tear my eyes away as Lord Viol made his way through the crowd, walking this way.

I got to my feet without thinking.

We'd been making eye contact for a while now. Besides, I was planning to say hello, since this was a rare occurrence, him appearing at a ball like this. Besides, I needed to thank him.

Lord Viol walked right up to me as I predicted, a small smile on his face.

I heard gasps all around me. "Lord Viol just smiled!" ...was no doubt what they all wanted to say, but they restrained themselves.

His smile was a rare sight indeed, and the fact that he'd approach me—no one knew of any connection between us—was doubly surprising. Now everyone's eyes were upon us.

After all, this wasn't the dance floor, but a space put aside for eating, drinking, and chatting. We were on full display here. I racked my brains for something appropriate to say.

"Oh, good. You seem in fine health, Lady Seren," he said, starting the conversation.

"Oh, yes. I'm doing very well. The rejuvenation spell you taught me has worked wonders. I've been meaning to thank you properly," I promptly responded with a curtsy.

"You seemed about to drop at any moment the last we spoke. I'm so pleased to see you looking well again."

To dispel any awkward rumors, I felt it better to lightly mention the official cover story behind our connection. Just chatting with Lord Viol like this made my heart dance. But I knew I had to put on a convincing performance with so many eyes on us.

It made me nervous, though. I've never been much good at reading the machinations of the human mind. But Lord Viol didn't seem bothered one bit by all the curious eyes on us.

"There's no need to thank me... Although, perhaps, there *is* one thing you

could do to repay the favor.”

“Oh yes, if it’s something I’m capable of doing, I’d be glad to.”

But despite my eagerness, Lord Viol seemed to hesitate for a moment, his eyes darting to mine.

“That is... Would you dance one song with me, perhaps?”

“Huh?!”

I heard the crowd around us all begin to squeal and gasp.

I was speechless. Since my time as a debutante, I had never been asked to dance by any man who wasn’t in my immediate circle.

“...Is it an impossibility, after all?”

I was too shocked to respond. But Lord Viol leaned in, lowering his voice so only I could hear. The inquisitive look on his face brought to mind perky black cat ears and a pin-straight, adorable tail...

Please don’t look at me with those eyes.

Calm down! Calm down! Or so I kept telling myself.

I wasn’t very used to it myself...but there was nothing unusual about a young woman dancing with multiple men over the course of a single ball. So I should just smile and nod and accept like there was nothing to it. *That’s all there is to this, after all.*

If only I could keep myself from blushing...

Lord Viol took a step closer as I stood trapped in my thoughts and offered me his hand.

“Lady Seren...your hand, please.”

“...I’d be delighted.”

As the crowd around us squealed, I tried to smile naturally as I accepted Lord Viol’s hand. I could only hope my cheeks weren’t bright red.

Lord Viol led me to the dance floor and the other dancers kindly parted to make space for us. Lord Viol and I slid into the space as if it was only natural for

us to be there.

I had only ever danced with Prince Helios, so I never noticed, but I'd heard from others that it was difficult to carve out a good spot on the dance floor at balls. I was pleased that the others had made space for us this time.

Based on what Vi said, Lord Viol was apparently a terrible dancer. So I was pleased that we'd at least made it past the first hurdle and gotten a spot on the dance floor without trouble.

When I looked up at him, I realized that he looked relieved as well, even as he gazed at me.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a dancer," I said hesitantly, "so a dance with me won't do very well as a thank-you gesture."

"I think I should be the judge of that," he said. "Anyway, I'm very pleased and incredibly grateful that you accepted my hand."

"Oh, no! Thank you for being the one to invite me to dance. Actually...this is my first time ever being asked to dance like this."

"Oh? Is it? Only I..."

For some reason, he frowned then and began to look extremely awkward. *What could be the matter?*

"Only the thing is," he continued sheepishly, "even though I asked you to dance...I'm really not any good at it..."

I broke into a smile. After asking me to dance with such confidence, ignoring the curious looks all around us, *now* was the moment he showed reluctance?

It was sort of adorable...

"Don't worry about it, please," I reassured him. "I actually assisted the dance teacher many times over the past two years as part of my princess consort training. I'm used to dancing with men who are beginners."

Lord Viol's movements were definitely stiff and amateurish, to be sure. He lacked confidence, especially compared to Prince Helios. However...

"I shall do my best to make it an enjoyable time for you," he said firmly. "I

apologize in advance if I step on your toes.”

“Please leave it to me! Besides,” I smiled, “I’m good at dodging.”

I couldn’t help being happy with those earnest eyes on me. Even if he wasn’t much of a dancer, it really didn’t seem like it’d matter much.

“You’re so reliable, Lady Seren,” he said, a bit awed.

“It’s just a matter of practice. I’ve danced these same steps a thousand times. It’s kind of like...how you’re the man everyone goes to when it comes to magic in this kingdom, right?”

Just as I finished saying this, Lord Viol brought his foot down where mine had just landed. I hopped quickly, moving my foot and narrowly evading a stomping.

“Yikes, that was close!” he said apologetically. “...Nice dodge.”

“There’s a certain knack to dodging.” I smiled at him, and he nodded, looking relieved. “Don’t be nervous. Let’s just enjoy this moment. Dancing is all about joy, after all.”

“Is it? Well, I do feel a bit more relaxed now.”

“Incidentally, I’m just thrilled to dance with you like this, Lord Viol. Even if you *do* step on my feet, I’m confident this moment will become a memory I’ll treasure for years.”

“I... I see.”

His voice suddenly got quieter. He looked bashful. As he looked away, I noticed the tips of his ears were cherry red. I felt a bit guilty staring at him, so I looked over his shoulder instead, out at the crowd. I was shocked, then, to see just how much everyone was paying attention to us.

The dancers nearby were snatching glances at us as they passed. But people at the food tables seemed to have become frozen. No one was eating; they were just watching us dance. I had never drawn such attention during any of the many dances I’d danced with Prince Helios.

The realization made me feel self-conscious, so I returned my attentions to Lord Viol and focused my eyes firmly on his throat.

“.....”

As we danced silently, I thought I felt him squeeze my hand a little, so I looked up. He gazed down at me and smiled.

The onlookers all gasped again.

“Finally,” he muttered, “I seem to have relaxed.”

His eyes crinkling warmly, Lord Viol tightened his other arm around my waist. We were suddenly a lot closer, and I felt my heart begin to pound rapidly.

Oh...his eyes are so dark. So dark and beautiful.

Gazing at them up close like this, I could see they were so dark there was almost no delineation to be drawn between the pupil and the iris. They were the kind of black that seemed liable to suck you in. And I could see myself, reflected in those stunning eyes...



I wonder why, all of a sudden... A few moments ago, I was just fine...

Somehow, making eye contact with Lord Viol seemed terribly embarrassing now.

I was suddenly horribly aware of my cheeks, which threatened to turn red any moment, the view I had of our feet since I couldn't look up, and the thundering of my heart.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"...What?" I squeaked.

"Ah, it's just...you suddenly look quite downcast. Are you perhaps tired from having to deal with my terrible dancing?"

"Not at all!"

I shook my head, alarmed that he'd think that. In fact, I had never experienced a more thrilling dance in all my life. I didn't want him to think I wasn't enjoying myself.

"I'm having a wonderful, wonderful time!"

"Good. As am I."

"...!"

Then for the first time that day, Lord Viol gave me a real, broad smile.

The onlookers all shrieked again. Honestly, I wanted to squeal as well.

"I always thought of dancing as something troublesome and nerve-wracking." Lord Viol was still smiling as he continued, "I'd no idea it could be this much fun. Thank you, Lady Seren."

"Not at all! I mean, I... I'm having fun, too!"

That was all I could manage to squeak out.

I was sure Lord Viol had no idea how devastating that smile of his was. It was hard to stay on my feet in the face of such an impactful smile. And to hear him say that he was enjoying the dance, despite never having liked the thought of it! My heart felt as though it was about to soar.

I, too, am so delighted, Lord Viol.

As that thought crossed my mind, I immediately chastised myself.

But no! I simply can't afford to start blushing right now!

Right, I just need to make sure I avoid looking at his face directly. Better yet, I'll pretend it's not his face at all but that of an adorable black cat... Oh no, that only makes him seem even more dashing!

"Ah..."

"Yeek!"

All of a sudden, Lord Viol's boot came down lightly on my toes and I lost my balance, stumbling backward. But he had his arm tight around my back and managed to save me from taking a tumble.

Oh dear. I let my mind run away with me, thinking all kinds of distracting thoughts. Just when we were enjoying such a splendid dance, too. Please forgive me, Lord Viol...

"S-Sorry!" I sputtered.

"No, it was my fault. I was the one who stepped on your toes. Forgive me."

"Oh, no, I failed to dodge it. That was my fault... I apolo—" That's when I realized his face was right up next to mine, his muscular arm tight around me. I trailed off, lost for words.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked, worried.

"N-N-No, I'm fine. You didn't even really put your weight on it."

Phew, I managed to speak.

"But I stomped fairly hard. I do apologize for not being more careful."

"Oh no, I'm always prepared for a foot-stomping much worse than that, so it's fine."

Lord Viol's face was usually stoic, but in that moment, he looked so solemn that I couldn't help smiling at him. As a result, my pounding heart finally started to calm down. *By the way, Lord Viol, I can stand on my own now, actually...*

“Um...”

“Seren! Are you all right?”

“Oh, Prince Helios.”

I was just about to suggest to Lord Viol that I could stand on my own now when, for some reason, Prince Helios gallantly appeared and began lightly tugging on my arm. Surprised, I let him pull me away from Lord Viol’s embrace.

The crowd all squealed again, but three times louder this time.

I could understand why the young ladies were squealing. Prince Helios looked dashing with his golden hair shimmering under the chandeliers, and Lord Viol looked like a vision of frosty beauty in the dark of night with his all-black attire and long, raven hair. The two of them together...now that was a visual treat, make no mistake.

“Did you hurt your foot?” His Highness asked.

“No, I’m totally fine. I just lost my balance for a moment.”

“You always downplay everything...”

I smiled brightly, but he was clearly concerned and saw through me as he always did. He frowned and sighed, before turning to Lord Viol and speaking in a low, tempered voice.

“Archmage Viol, if you insist on dancing with *my* fiancée, I must ask you to at least refrain from stomping on her feet. I was sweating watching you.”

“...I apologize.”

Oh, Lord Viol, I’m so sorry!

But if I stuck up for Lord Viol right now, it might look like I was disrespecting Prince Helios. I felt trapped. I could only look back and forth between the two of them.

“Your Highness, I apologize,” someone said, interrupting the tense moment. “My friend is a talented mage, but his dancing skills are...well, as you can see...”

“Prime Minister Borden,” Prince Helios greeted him.

Prime Minister Borden appeared as if from nowhere and joined the

conversation. The tension between the men seemed to dissipate some and I breathed a sigh of relief. I was so glad Prime Minister Borden intervened just then.

“In order to avoid any future incidents, I will see to it this dunderhead undergoes rigorous dance training. So please overlook his little mistake this evening.”

“...Yes, see that he does,” Prince Helios sniffed.

“Incidentally, Your Highness, it appears the next dance is about to start. Would it be all right with you if I invited Lady Seren to dance this next one with me?” Prime Minister Borden asked.

“Certainly. This is a ball. We’re meant to mingle and talk to all sorts of people. No one would oppose it.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Prime Minister Borden immediately took my hand and began leading me in a dance that took us across the floor and away from the scene.

I had no idea Prime Minister Borden was such a great dancer! Each step he took was bold and I felt like I was being spun across the floor by him. Oddly, though, it felt like one of the smoothest dances I had experienced.

I looked up at him in surprise and he winked cheekily at me.

“Ah, that was an awkward situation back there, huh?” he said with a grin. “We have to get away from the scene as fast as possible!”

“B-But we can’t just leave those two there when they’re not getting along...”

“Worry not. You and I are dancing now, and besides, there’s a long line of ladies waiting to distract the prince with a dance. It should be fine. See, one such young lady has just taken the prince’s hand.”

Prime Minister Borden jerked his chin across the room. I could see Prince Helios already surrounded by a throng of girls. And it looked like he was just getting ready to dance with one of them.

Oh phew, I couldn’t have handled it if there was any animosity between Prince Helios and Lord Viol. I breathed a sigh of relief, and Prime Minister

Borden gave me a look of amusement.

“See, what’d I say? Nothing to worry about. Look over at the table you were just sitting at. I’d be careful before I went back over there, if I were you.”

It was true. My lady friends and the other guests were all still watching me dance with far too much interest. If I returned to that table, no doubt I’d be barraged with questions. *But never mind that...*

“I wonder if Lord Viol will be all right?” I asked.

Prince Helios was busy dancing with a new girl, so no one would be able to question him. Lord Viol, on the other hand, would be wide open. No doubt he’d hate to be surrounded. But Prime Minister Borden just laughed.

“Ah, don’t worry about him. His unapproachable aura will serve him well here. Even if someone does talk to him, one look from those cold eyes of his will send them scuttling off in a jiffy.”

Prime Minister Borden seemed to spot Lord Viol through the crowd at last and indicated for me to follow his eyeline. Yes, I could see him there, in black from head to toe.

Prime Minister Borden, it seemed, was right. Lord Viol was leaning against the wall, eyes closed, and while the people nearby were obviously sneaking glances at him, no one seemed willing to approach or call out to him.

“See? It’s odd, isn’t it? Almost as if he was casting some sort of spell. No one can approach him. No point asking him anyway; he’d only deny it.”

Hmm. Yes, Lord Viol does give off a scary aura. But based only on my limited experience, I couldn’t tell if it was magic or just his natural attitude.

At any rate, as long as Lord Viol wasn’t having a bad time right now, that was enough for me.

“He’s also good at making a subtle exit,” Prime Minister Borden went on, “so no doubt, he’ll scuttle off to my office when he’s had enough. I’ve left instructions that he and Riesz be allowed to use it.”

“You and Lord Viol really are good friends, aren’t you, Prime Minister Borden?”

“Just Borden is fine. Actually, Viol’s more an old frenemy of mine from our school days. But you’re something else, aren’t you, Lady Seren? I can probably count on one hand how many times I’ve seen Viol smile like that.”

“I *knew* it was a rare sight!”

If that smile was a regular occurrence, no doubt scores of young ladies would’ve already fallen for him. For some reason, I really didn’t like the thought of that...

After that, Borden kept telling me funny tales of his past with Lord Viol and the rest of our dance passed by enjoyably.

Borden was a skilled dancer and a great talker with a quick wit. He always looked so serious, as if his mind was filled with complex matters, so it was really fun getting to see this different side of him.

“Borden, thank you for taking care of me.”

“Don’t mention it. May I have the honor of another dance sometime?”

“Of course.”

No doubt Borden only showed up to rescue his old friend, but this socially aware request of his made me genuinely smile in return. I was very grateful to him. Just then, a hand with long, slim fingers appeared in front of me.

“May I have this next dance?”

“Riesz...”

I could only gaze up at Riesz in surprise.

After all, Riesz was usually my chatting and buffet-table-raiding partner at balls like these. *Why, I’ve never once seen him take to the dance floor.*

“You’d be surprised,” he continued, “but I’m actually quite a decent dancer.”

“I had no idea!”

“I’d like to witness the fruits of my younger brother’s self-improvement efforts,” Borden suddenly said. “Lady Seren, please honor him with a dance, if you’d like.”

I was actually a little tired... I’d never danced so much before. But I couldn’t

say no to Borden's request.

I took Riesz's hand and he smiled at me, greatly pleased.

The music started up again and he took the lead gently. Unlike Borden and his wild moves, our dance was much more subdued and comfortable. Maybe it was because of Riesz, who I often chatted with on a regular basis during the salon sessions. There was no need for me to be on edge.

Dancing felt just like an extension of our time chatting. Riesz kept pace with me perfectly, which made things feel effortless. We chatted, but he didn't mention the altercation between Lord Viol and Prince Helios or magic at all. Instead, we made pleasant small talk. I found myself really relaxing and having a good time.

Just as our relaxing dance came to an end, I found myself confronted with a sea of hands, coming at me from every angle.

Goodness, what's with all this? What's even going on this evening...?

I was struck dumb in surprise, but Riesz simply chuckled wryly.

"It looks like everyone's figured out that asking Lady Seren to dance is apparently an option now," he said, slyly grinning.

"Oh my..."

I never gave any indication that asking me to dance was off-limits before, though... At least, I didn't think I did...

It seemed strange. But when I looked at the faces attached to the waiting hands, it made sense. Most of them were my former students, the ones whose dance lessons I'd assisted with. They were clearly still nervous dancers and no doubt would feel much more comfortable dancing with someone familiar like myself.

"Oh, Mashlo. You, too?" Riesz was smiling sardonically, and I followed his eyeline to see Mashlo standing there. This was very unexpected.

"Huh? Lord Mashlo?" I recalled Mashlo saying how much he hated dancing. "Lord Mashlo, please don't trouble yourself," I said quickly. "I'm actually getting tired of dancing now anyway."

But the moment I said those words, Mashlo's face fell.

"So, in other words, you refuse to dance with me! Even though you just danced with Riesz!"

Mashlo hung his head. He looked like he was about to start crying. I felt terrible and just couldn't deny him.

Why are his eyes swimming with tears?

I had no idea what was going on, but after casting a quick rejuvenation spell, I reached out and took Mashlo's hand.

Hmm? Is he nervous?

Mashlo's hand...it trembled in mine, just a little.

Marietta 1

This is *My* Chance...!

THE ballroom was filled with the giddy voices of the other young ladies.

I frowned a little as I looked at the source of the noise, surprised at how rowdy they were tonight. That's when I saw something unbelievable. My sister...dancing with *the* Frosty Archmage! I was so shocked, I almost missed a step. *Me!* I quickly followed it up with an impeccable twirl, feeling guilty toward my partner for nearly messing up. Internally, though, I was all aflutter.

What events could possibly have led to this?!

My sister *never* accepted any dance invitations. But there she was, smiling and chatting away. With Lord Viol! He was actually *dancing!* With Seren!

I had a firm mind to give her a good talking-to later, one that lasted at least an hour. Trying to appear calm and unruffled, I adjusted my position so I could get a better look at Seren and her...partner.

Now I understood why all the other girls had been squealing. Lord Viol was a handsome fellow, make no mistake. Although *personally*, I don't like people who barely speak or smile and go through life as a statue.

But just as I was mentally writing him off as a cold fish, he broke into a wide, happy smile.

Whoa, he's...actually smiling! And he seems to be really enjoying their conversation, to boot!

What sorcery had Seren committed, to breathe life into this stone man?! I narrowed my eyes as I watched them dance together, seemingly oblivious to the other girls' gasps and squeals.

This is my chance!

I'd never said this to anyone, but I also *desperately* wanted to be queen!

Until now, Seren never left so much as a crack open for me. *But look! Look at that joyous expression! I've never seen her smile like that when dancing with Prince Helios. That's for sure!* I didn't know if she was aware of it herself or not, but I knew what I was looking at. My sister had deep feelings for that statue... I mean, Lord Viol. *Perhaps the seeds of love are already sprouting!*

I grinned, delighted by this possibility.

There were so many ways in which my sister was the epitome of perfection. Hard-working, with perfect marks in every lesson and training session. A kind personality, just right for propping up Prince Helios. Absolutely zero rumors or scandals to her name. There was no girl better suited to be the future queen. That was what everyone said.

Everyone except *me!*

Seren's wonderful, of course. I'm proud she's my big sister! But there was one thing that made me believe she didn't have what it took to be Prince Helios's future queen.

I mean, all her qualities that everyone raved over so much! They were all...*acquired*. It was all because of the hard work she had put in and her sheer diligence through the years. When we were kids, she'd stay up late studying, never once thinking about having any fun. These were the best years of her looks, after all, and she was wrecking her skin from lack of sleep! She left her makeup and outfits to her maid, showing absolutely no interest. I lost my temper with her so many times because she simply wouldn't listen to reason!

Every time, she'd just smile awkwardly and say, "You're so sweet, Marietta. But I have to study." Then off she went to another late night cracking the books. *That* was how she was planning to rule? She just thought she could keep that up indefinitely, did she? Everyone thought it came so easy to her. But little did they know it took up all her free time, all her mental energy, and all her strength!

If she wasn't betrothed to Prince Helios, I'd have just stood back and watched over her with sisterly concern.

But Prince Helios just wasn't *meant* for her. They just didn't go together at all! Their marriage would be one of mutual suffering and silence until the day came

when they both cracked!

Fools! He'd be king one day. She'd be queen. They both thought they had to work harder than anyone else. Which...okay, fair! But that'd only be uncomfortable for everyone around them.

I could never do what Seren did. And my prince, the palace's full of competent old fogeys and young bucks. Why not let them pick up the slack and do the real fighting on the vanguard?

But if it was me, I'd turn to poor overworked Prince Helios and say, "Why don't you take a short rest?" Yes, I'd be the one to stop him!

If it was me, I'd skillfully handle all the social interactions Seren shied away from. I would deal with all the girls' talk and feel not one tiny bit of stress.

Sister, listen to reason. Just leave it to me!

Prince Helios...just lean on me instead!

If only I could say those words out loud! Whenever I thought of Prince Helios and his cool, composed features, my chest burned!

The first time I met Prince Helios, I realized what a workaholic he was, just like Seren. I was terrified that one day he'd collapse entirely, then before I even knew what was happening, I realized that I'd fallen in love with him.

He always smiled and acted like nothing was wrong, but I knew he was backed into a corner, unable to cry for help! He was so solemn, so earnest, so good-natured...and so, so, so *stupid!*

Wouldn't I do for you instead? I, too, am a duke's daughter, you know?

How many times had I thought that silently to myself? But I could never say it out loud. I knew how hard Seren had worked to get to this point. But it wasn't fair! I loved Prince Helios so much more than she ever could.

Both of them focused all their mental energy on their duty and fulfilling their birthright. They acted like it was the most natural thing in the world. But that's not love! That's not romance!

Arranged marriages! Pah! They're positively prehistoric! They should go extinct! If I could just make my move before the two of them got past the point

of no return, then I could make Prince Helios love me! I just knew it!

I gazed at Seren, who appeared to have just dodged Lord Viol's heavy foot, when all of a sudden, Prince Helios rushed over to them.

What?

I swallowed down all the words I could never say. I was pleased the prince cared for Seren. But at the same time, it...**INFURIATED** me! Now my sister was dancing with the prime minister, completely oblivious to my turmoil. Now I was mulling things over in my head. Tonight's events had sparked something in my brain. An idea was set in motion inside me, without me even realizing it.

Yes... This is my chance...!

Arranged marriage? So what? If my sister obligingly went and fell for someone else, what did it matter who it was?

Meanwhile, I'd hunt down the prince...and make him *mine*.

Viol 6

An Angel...!

DANCING is a difficult thing.

You can practice the form all you like, but when actually dancing with a woman, it's hard to know where to put your feet. The more you focus on it, the more missteps you make. And then, you find yourself focusing too much on your feet, your back hunched. It's nerve-wracking enough being this unusually close to another person. It beats me how everyone else manages to dance with such nonchalant expressions on their faces.

When I think about how there must be people who actually *like* dancing, the whole thing seems even weirder.

And yet...dancing with Lady Seren just got more and more fun as the dance went on.

I couldn't recall seeing her dance at any previous balls (that I'd attended anyway...). But she had the practiced air of someone who had undergone training. She managed to dodge my clumsy steps and simply smiled whenever I narrowly evaded stamping on her feet. I was certain it couldn't have been much fun for her, but then she went and said, "Even if you *do* step on my feet, I'm confident this moment will become a memory I'll treasure for years."

What an angel she was...!

My plan was to shake things up among Prince Helios and his friends so I could gauge their reaction. Never had I imagined that dancing with Lady Seren would put such a warm feeling of joy in my chest.

Without thinking, I squeezed Lady Seren's warm hand and she looked up at me, her amber eyes focused on mine. *So...pretty!*

"Finally, I seem to have relaxed."

I felt I had to say something, as fixed as I was by those amber eyes. But in

truth, I hadn't calmed down at all. In fact, my nerves only got worse, and my arms kept tightening reflexively around Lady Seren's waist until I realized I was practically holding her.

We were...so close!

Entirely too close!

I couldn't be this close to her...not as myself...

I knew that, of course. But I couldn't look away from Lady Seren's beautiful eyes as they looked up at mine. I don't know how long we gazed at each other. It felt like an eternity as the same song kept on playing, never stopping.

This is risky. Too risky! I knew I shouldn't gaze too intensely at a lady; I learned that during the etiquette training I'd received after becoming a High Mage. I was staring *far* too much.

I needed to say something, *anything* to distract my pounding heart. I opened my mouth and all that came out was "Are you all right?"

"...What?" she asked, clearly confused.

"Ah," I said desperately. "It's just...you suddenly look quite downcast. Are you perhaps tired from having to deal with my terrible dancing?"

I felt pretty confident that she must've silently agreed with my sudden assessment. But instead, she said things like "Not at all!" and "I'm having a wonderful, wonderful time," all with a smile that would put even the prettiest sunflower to shame. *What an angel!*

"Good. As am I."

Those words came naturally to me.

"I always thought of dancing as something troublesome and nerve-wracking. I'd no idea it could be this much fun. Thank you, Lady Seren."

My mouth went ahead and formed words of its own accord. As I spoke, I realized that was how I truly felt. Yes...dancing with Lady Seren was a pure, uncomplicated joy.

"Not at all! I mean, I... I'm having fun, too!"

Lady Seren blushed and looked down, an adorable display. Distracted, I messed up my steps. This time, Lady Seren didn't look like she was going to be able to dodge it. She lost her balance and began to topple backward. Unthinking, I strengthened my arm around her.

"Whoops."

That was close. But phew...I managed to steady her. If Lady Seren fell on the dance floor, that would be terrible. Goodness, what a close call.

I felt a bead of cold sweat slide down my back. I apologized, of course. But for some reason, Lady Seren apologized too and then the two of us got stuck in an apology cycle. *She's actually apologizing for not having dodged fast enough! That's far too magnanimous of her...!*

"Seren! Are you all right?"

Then a golden-haired young man came dashing over. *Ah... His Highness.*

I felt my back straighten. I'd been having entirely too much fun dancing with Lady Seren. But of course, my plan was to see how the prince and his little friends would react. That was why I was here, after all.

My initial impression was that the prince showed a distinct lack of interest in Lady Seren. But the way he came running over to us was surprising. As was the concern on his face as he turned to Lady Seren and asked, "Did you hurt your foot?"

Then he turned to glare at me.

"Archmage Viol, if you insist on dancing with *my* fiancée, I must ask you to at least refrain from stomping on her feet. I was sweating watching you."

"...I apologize."

He was right, of course. And as this *was* the crown prince saying this, I was duty-bound to apologize. I already felt terrible enough about almost knocking Lady Seren flat on the dance floor. But I also noted how Prince Helios was actually giving me quite the warning here, despite his calm tone. The way he emphasized certain words was also telling.

"Your Highness, I apologize. My friend is a talented mage, but his dancing

skills are...well, as you can see..."

For some reason, my old frenemy Borden chose now to intervene. No doubt he was throwing me a life raft. He always had an eye for noticing the little details. He truly had a kind heart beneath his cool exterior.

"In order to avoid any future incidents," Borden went on, "I will see to it this dunderhead undergoes rigorous dance training. So please overlook his little mistake this evening."

I almost grunted aloud.

Hold on! Hold on! What? Me undergo more of that hellish dance training? I mean, I certainly feel bad about my failure tonight... But to subject me to more of Count Blaze's tyranny, especially with him knowing about how badly I performed...

"Incidentally, Your Highness, it appears the next dance is about to start. Would it be all right with you if I invited Lady Seren to dance this next one with me?"

Ignoring my trembling, Borden whisked Lady Seren away from me and spirited her across the dance floor before I even knew what was happening.

I knew he was multitalented...but I'd no idea he was such a skilled dancer.

What a disgusting display! I'm distinctly unimpressed. Unimpressed, I say!

Now I was left standing silently as Lady Seren whirled across the dance floor and out of my reach. By my side stood Prince Helios in the same stunned silence. We both stared across the floor at Lady Seren.

I understood how he felt.

"Um, Your Highness...the next song has already started. Would you consider asking me to dance?"

All of a sudden, the prince was surrounded by young ladies jostling to be his next dance partner. While he was distracted by the ladies, I took the opportunity to remove myself from the dance floor and cast a quick cloaking spell to make myself less conspicuous.

With the spell I'd cast, I was still visible corporeally, but it had the effect of

discouraging anyone from speaking to me. It was perfect for events like this, where I wanted to be seen, not bothered. It was a spell I came up with to help with social anxiety and a very handy little spell it was.

I moved to a spot where I could get a good look at Lady Seren, then leaned against the wall and heaved a sigh.

I looked around the dance floor. Many eyes were fixed on Lady Seren and Borden. Lady Seren never usually danced much, so to dance with me and then the prime minister...that was certainly out of the ordinary. Borden, too, was much more likely to be seen discussing state affairs with the middle-aged men than whirling around the dance floor with a young woman.

I could hear whispers around me, saying things like “I had no idea Prime Minister Borden was such a good dancer” and “He looks quite dashing” and things like that. Even though Borden attended every single ball and social function, he’d clearly never registered on the young ladies’ radar until tonight.

I could also hear the silly young aristocrat men gossiping about Seren as well.

“Doesn’t Lady Seren actually look sort of...pretty tonight?”

“What, you mean Princess Drab?”

“I’m a Marietta fellow, myself.”

And other nonsense like that, which made my blood boil. *It’s because of you fools and your brainless comments that Lady Seren has lost all her confidence!*

All right then, you silly little rich boys! I’ve memorized each one of your faces. And I’m going to make you all pay, I promised myself.

Among those who couldn’t peel their eyes from Lady Seren, I noticed three individuals in particular.

The first was Prince Helios himself. While continuing to dance with the young lady who’d propositioned him earlier, he kept following Lady Seren around the dance floor with his eyes. Maybe he was concerned about the foot I’d stepped on. Or was he...bothered by Lady Seren dancing with yet another man who wasn’t him?

As I watched, I began to feel a sense of doubt creep in. Was it *really* her

younger sister he was taken with? This whole time, he seemed to fixate only on Lady Seren. Lady Marietta hadn't gotten so much as a glance from him.

For her part, Marietta kept sneaking glances at both the prince and her older sister whenever she got the chance. No doubt she had some thoughts about the prince, her sister, and tonight's events. *Perhaps she's up to something...*

Finally, my attention was drawn to the redheaded brat, Mashlo.

He kept his flame-red eyes, which matched his hair, locked on Lady Seren. According to rumor, he was part of the Marietta Fanclub. *So then why is he staring at Lady Seren with those creepy eyes?* I was half-afraid he might do something to her, so I cast a quick protective spell over Lady Seren, just to be safe.

I was sure she'd be fine. But a little insurance never hurt.

Once I was satisfied Lady Seren was well-protected, I grabbed a wineglass and went over to check out the food tables. *Ah, they always put out a good spread at these balls!*

Everything was served in bite-sized pieces to facilitate eating and socializing at the same time. And it was all fresh and flavorful. The serving platters were arranged in little towers, like how sandwiches and cakes are served during afternoon tea. So, even with my height, I was able to easily reach what I wanted.

My eye was initially drawn to the cakes and desserts, served so beautifully and looking so colorful. But no! I couldn't consume my beloved sweets in a place like this. I wouldn't be able to suppress the reflexive grin that came whenever I consumed sugar.

I was born in poverty, so I'd never had access to sweets as a child. Now, as an adult, I was powerless to resist their appeal.

Oh, but they look so delicious... No, no. I don't need them!

After all, I had the excellent treats that Lady Seren prepared for me on a regular basis. I didn't *need* to eat these desserts. Or so I kept telling myself, when the music suddenly switched to a slow tempo. It was almost time for Lady Seren and Borden to part.

The transition between dances always led to a lot of hustle and bustle. I couldn't miss the chance to observe it. As I scanned the crowd, I located Borden, just about to part from Lady Seren. Then as I watched, another man came sidling up.

Who's that? I wondered, narrowing my eyes as it came to me.

That was, if I wasn't mistaken, Borden's younger brother, Riesz.

From a distance, both were medium-build and fairly low-key. The only real difference between them was that Borden's brown, straight hair was kept short and slicked neatly back, while Riesz had short hair with soft waves. At just a few years younger, he looked so much like Borden. *But what's his intention, taking Lady Seren's hand like that?*

Was it that he felt it easier to ask her to dance now, after she'd danced with me and then Borden? But no... Perhaps Borden was the one putting it into his head from the start? *It's possible...*

Riesz began to dance with Seren, demonstrating a confident lead and steady pace. Lady Seren followed his steps, a warm smile on her face.

Wait...wasn't he the one who noticed Lady Seren's rejuvenation spell and mentioned it to her? If anyone out there was likely to sniff out our secret arrangement, it'd be this young man here.

Done dancing now, Borden smiled and waved politely but dismissively at the women who had approached him, instead making his way over to me. Surreptitiously, I dissolved my cloaking spell.

"Hello, Viol! You certainly stood out there on the dance floor." As I was expecting, Borden spoke to me in a joking, friendly tone.

But how to respond in a crowded social setting like this? I stayed silent, frowning. Borden chuckled at this before calling over a passing maid and saying something to her. Then he turned back to me, grinning.

"You must be tired after dancing. I dare say you're not used to it. If you'd like to go rest, you're more than welcome to use my private study."

That was all he said. Then he walked off.

I sighed. No doubt this was code for “I want to talk to you, so come to my study.” No doubt he’d things to discuss that he’d rather not risk the aristocracy overhearing. After all, this *was* the palace. There were countless rooms for guests to go sit and take a rest from the party. And my own chambers in the mage quarters weren’t far away, either.

When I first became a Mage, I didn’t understand social subterfuge. So back then, I would’ve countered with “I have my own room to rest in” and simply gone home. Only to receive a smiling rebuke from Borden later.

But now I reckoned, if he’d come up to me and said “Come to my office, I need to talk to you,” it’d have been too obvious he wanted to interrogate me.

I always preferred to leave people alone and be left alone, but aristocrats wanted the complete opposite. They were such a hassle to deal with.

I recast my cloaking spell and resumed perusing the buffet, thinking dark thoughts to myself about how annoying aristocrats were, keeping one eye on Seren all the while.

Now Riesz and Lady Seren were chatting away, both smiling. But as dancers, they had begun to blend into the crowd. The young man was unremarkable in looks, had no title, and seemed to be only a passable dancer. With such a nondescript partner, Lady Seren, who had drawn the whole room’s attention just minutes before, became just another dancer.

I knew it was me who had set in place all the fuss around her, but since Lady Seren didn’t seem to enjoy the spotlight, she was probably feeling quite relieved now.

Just as she must’ve been starting to really relax, the dance switched to a more mellow tempo, and she seemed ready to make her way back over to the tables. Before she could move, though, a new crowd gathered around her, and my eyes widened as I watched.

What now...?

Hey! Hold on!

In the midst of the crowd...isn’t that that Mashlo boy, lurking?! What are you doing joining the throng of hopeful dance candidates? Are you planning

something nefarious, using the crowd as cover?

I wanted to know what was happening, but the other boys' heads were blocking my view. Still, I had Lady Seren under a protective spell that would keep her safe from any *psychical* attacks. But just as I thought that, the crowd parted and the boys began to disperse.

I was astonished.

...Lady Seren! What's happened?! Why are you holding that redhead's hand?!

My heart leaped with concern and I wanted nothing more than to dash over there. But I couldn't do that at a ball like this. Riesz was still smiling, which at least reassured me nothing too terrible was going on. But Lady Seren had an unreadable look on her face.

Hmm? She just strengthened her rejuvenation spell. Well, this is her fourth dance in a row...fifth if you count Prince Helios.

Lady Seren never danced more than once or twice at balls, so she must've been feeling very tired indeed.

As soon as the next dance began, I noticed the difference.

That bratty redhead...he was such a bad dancer, he almost made *me* look good! *He must be an aristocrat if he's a guest here, but goodness...*

Lady Seren kept having to leap out of the way of his bumbling feet, and he had almost all the steps wrong. This guy made me look like a dance king in comparison.

I knew I was hardly one to talk, but I couldn't help being distinctly unimpressed. As I watched Mashlo, scrutinizing his face, I started thinking to myself.

His face was as red as his hair...and he seemed unable to look Lady Seren in the eye. *His eyeballs are darting all over the place. Who can dance under conditions like that?*

Lady Seren did her best and never once showed any signs of amusement over the young man's pathetic attempts. That was so like her...!

That's when I understood. This fiery redhead professed himself a devotee of

Marietta, but that wasn't right at all. It was Lady Seren he was head over heels for! Just watching him was almost more than I could bear.

Finally, the dance was over, and I watched as Lady Seren separated from that redhead and politely turned down the flock of men who'd gathered again before leaving the dance floor and rejoining her friends. At last, I could...take my leave.

But no...Borden would be waiting for me in his office.

He'd saved me today, no matter how you sliced it. So I owed him at least a word of thanks before I retired for the evening. I would just have to be careful not to say too much.

I walked down the palace corridor and found myself at Borden's office door. Lightly, I knocked.

"You took your time." Borden answered the door himself, a warm smile on his face, and ushered me inside.

"What's this...?"

Something smelled good. Something smelled *sweet*.

I walked into the office to see a buffet of food, including desserts, laid out on Borden's desk, resembling the ones I'd admired in the ballroom before.

"Amazing..."

I couldn't avert my eyes any longer. I'd restrained myself back in the ballroom, afraid of prying eyes. But to see such beautiful sweets all laid out before me like this...!

Borden's bland office had been transformed into a sparkling showcase of delectable desserts.

"Now, now, wipe off that drool. It's uncouth."

Borden's voice snapped me out of my haze. I needed to be careful. Borden had summoned me to his office many times before, but he'd never put out a spread like this.

"Borden, what are you planning?" I asked.

“Whatever do you mean?”

His grin widened and my suspicions grew.

“You being so generous is giving me the creeps.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I thought you must be *tired* after all that rare dancing you did. Forgive me for trying to be a good friend and making a generous gesture toward someone who clearly struggled to evade temptation in front of all those people back there.”

“You’re up to something; I know it.” I narrowed my eyes at Borden, who chuckled out loud.

“You’re as straightforward as ever. But there’s nothing to fret over, you know. It’s just food. No strings attached.”

“*Hmph*. So you say...”

It pains me to admit it, but it’s a fact: whenever I’m busy eating sweets, my guard goes way down. I’m always afraid I might say the wrong thing, distracted by pure pleasure. My hesitation to eat the sweets he’d laid out was tantamount to me confessing I was hiding something.

...Curse you, Borden! You’re too sharp by far.

“I must warn you, though,” Borden went on, “my brother will be coming to join us before long.”

“What?”

“If you’d like to eat, now’s your only chance.”

“.....”

Pressured, I reached for the cake. Before I was even aware of what I was doing, the cake was in my mouth.

Oh! I’m weak! But oh, it’s so delicious! All I could think about now was this excellent Mont Blanc cake. It had thick chestnut cream with fresh cream slathered inside, spreading sweetness over my tongue. The pie base was crispy, crunchy, and delectable!

Lady Seren’s pâtissier was a master, of course. But the palace’s food was a cut

above. *Such artistry! And I've never been served custard pudding at Lady Seren's place. Ah, but she wouldn't, would she? It'd be too difficult for a cat to eat. So I'd better take this chance and snag it now.*

"It's amazing you can eat so many sweets one after another like that," Borden remarked as he watched me.

"Fool!" I cried. "Each one has a different flavor palate. Don't lump all sweets together!"

Borden merely shrugged, one eyebrow raised. *What a disappointment.*

For a while, he simply watched in silence as I devoured the desserts. Finally, he spoke. "Lady Seren seemed to be enjoying herself."

"Yes...even while dancing with you," I quipped.

"Well....yes, I suppose so."

I glanced up at Borden, chocolate mousse smeared around my mouth.

"What's with you? Where's your usual banter?"

"It's just... Viol, why did you invite her to dance?"

I knew he brought me here to question me. But the sweets were just too good! So I decided to throw caution to the wind.

"You know that I've been teaching Lady Seren rejuvenation magic, right?"

"Yes, my brother told me. I was surprised to see how good she's gotten, though."

"I've been curious to see how she's improving. Were it not for a social engagement like this, I would never have occasion to see her."

Would that do? It was an excuse I'd made up when I decided to attend the ball.

"But there was no need to ask her to dance, surely?" he pushed.

"If not for dancing, I'd never have been able to speak with her one-on-one. I could hardly approach her on the balcony and strike up a conversation."

"...Hmm, I see. So you wanted to speak to Lady Seren alone." Borden

muttered, fiddling with his monocle. Seeing the gears and cogs in his brain turning like that put me on edge.

“Stop beating about the bush,” I snapped. “If you’ve got something to say about this, say it.”

“All right.” But Borden still remained stubbornly silent. Then he lifted his chin to look at me, his expression stern. “Viol, could it be that you’ve fallen in love with Lady Seren?”

“What?”

Fallen in love?

Me? Fall in love with another person?

No, no, no, that’s preposterous. My only love is magic.

“That’s not possible.” I denied it.

Borden looked instantly relieved. “Oh, good! Because she’s the crown prince’s fiancée. If you told me you *had* fallen in love with her, I would’ve had to force you to reconsider. I’d have hated to do that to a friend.”

“Fool! We’ve known each other for ten years. Have you ever seen me show any interest in anything but magic?”

“You’re right, of course,” Borden said. Then he sighed, “Oh, thank goodness... So then you don’t think she’s adorable? Somewhat a...demi-goddess? You don’t think anything like that?”

“What? She *is* adorable. But that’s just a fact. And I wouldn’t call her a ‘demi-goddess,’” I scoffed. “But...she *IS* an angel, in my mind.”

“Viol...” Borden warned.

“But I won’t lose my mind and go fawning over her like a certain redheaded simpleton,” I clarified. “That’s what you mean by falling in love, isn’t it?”

“I really, *really* wish I hadn’t asked now.”

Borden always had such a teasing smile on his face. But now, for some reason, he looked extremely glum.

“You’ve never shown any interest in others,” he muttered. “So it’s a miracle

you even noticed such a thing.”

I nodded. Yes, he had a point. I’d never paid attention to others before. This would be a first.

“It’s hard to believe,” Borden went on, somewhat subdued. “You turn twenty-five, and suddenly you develop human feelings. As your friend, I want to support you, of course. But I have my position to think of... Please, let me think this all over a bit.”

“Hold on a second, Borden. You can’t seriously think I actually *have* fallen for Lady Seren? Do you really think it’s so, Borden?”

“Please don’t ask me that...”

I gazed at Borden, filled with trepidation, but he only sighed in response.



“More importantly than that, Viol...” he said hesitantly. “If... *If* Lady Seren marries a man other than you and lives happily ever after, could you be happy for her?”

“Of course I could,” I snapped. “I would! Her happiness is the most important thing in the world to me!”

“I see,” he sighed. “That’s good. That’s a relief.”

What foolishness is he thinking? I wondered. But it seemed to have been a major question in Borden’s mind. He gave me a relieved smile before picking up his teacup and taking a sip.

Borden 1

What a Conundrum...

VIOL stuffed his face with every dessert I had laid out for him. Then once he'd swallowed the last bite of cake, he left my room with a lackluster "Until next time." I watched him go and sighed heavily.

Goodness, what a turn of events. That antisocial blockhead, in love...

When I first heard that he had plans to ask Lady Seren to dance, I was slightly impressed Viol had finally gotten the gumption to actually *ask a lady to dance*.

However, seeing them together tonight made me break out into a cold sweat.

There was nothing too ostentatious about how they danced. But I could see it. Viol never smiled like that. *Never*.

And then there was Lady Seren's reaction. She seemed to be having fun, yes, but she also looked...bashful. As if, left to her own devices, she could...fall for Viol. That was the distinct impression I got.

But why *now*? Why when Prince Helios was finally ready to take the first step toward having a real relationship with her?

It'd happened just the other day. Lady Seren had asked the queen for permission to use her princess consort training time for self-study instead. Coincidentally, Prince Helios and I were in the back room, having business with the queen ourselves.

"Sweet Seren has absolutely dedicated herself to studying all this time. Rather than drowning herself in more books, I would love to see her have some fun in town and blow off some steam!" The queen made this comment after Lady Seren had left.

Prince Helios had then seemed to come to some sort of sudden realization and said, "Having some fun in town... Right. Riesz and Mashlo are always gallivanting off somewhere in town."

I was shocked. *Does that mean Prince Helios has never once had fun in town? Surely...he has in disguise? With his friends?*

But...hold on a minute...

“You don’t go to town, Prince Helios?” I asked. “Then where have you and Lady Seren gone when...deepening your relationship together?”

“We don’t often run into each other at the academy,” he said simply and a little shyly. “So usually, we just spend time together at salons or balls. Just chatting. Our relationship will deepen naturally on its own, right?”

“What?! You mean to say that you’ve neglected Lady Seren all this time?!” Her Majesty clutched her cheeks, practically shrieking.

She was shocked, yes. But so was I. *I should’ve thought to ask... How can they have a fruitful union when they’ve never even been on one date?*

In the past, arranged marriages were common practice, but these days, only the royals had them. The aristocracy and the common class both married for love. Indeed, many now raised eyebrows over what was now an archaic practice.

While neither Prince Helios nor Lady Seren had seemed to have any issue with their engagement, surely this young lady would’ve desired at least one date with her young fiancé.

Poor Lady Seren, to be so neglected.

“I didn’t *mean* to neglect her,” His Highness said defensively.

“But you’ve never asked the poor girl on a *single* date! Not one! In all these years!!” Her Majesty cried. “You foolish boy! It *seems* we forgot to teach you the important things! Forget studying!”

“Your Majesty, please calm down,” I said, trying to soothe her, as she’d gotten herself quite worked up.

She turned to me, her eyes wide and pleading like a lost little puppy. “Prime Minister Borden...” she breathed, her voice oddly tremulous for once.

“Is it...really such a terrible thing for me not to have taken her on a date?” Prince Helios asked me.

“Indeed it is!” the queen shrieked before I had time to think of an answer.

I had to say that the situation didn’t seem ideal to me either. Still, I tried to give the boy advice, and after their date, he’d come to me, proudly saying, “Prime Minister Borden, it was great! Lady Seren and I got matching pens. I think I’ll ask her on regular dates from now on!”

...A very cute report, indeed.

I wanted to support my good friend in his belated first love.

If only it wasn’t Prince Helios’s fiancée he’d fallen for. I *was* the prime minister, after all. I couldn’t condone, much less support this. Besides, I’d already been giving the young prince romantic advice.

“What a conundrum...” I muttered.

“Bordeeen!”

The door opened with a slamming sound. I almost jumped out of my skin. Apparently, I’d been deep in my thoughts.

“What *is* it, Riesz?” I asked, glaring at my little brother. “It’s not like you to slam about.”

“What is it, indeed!” he fumed. “I don’t know if he’s your friend or your nemesis, but what the heck is that Archmage thinking?!”

“Whoa, whoa! Why are you getting so upset?”

“Seren’s engaged to the prince! How *dare* he ask her to dance like that? Especially when he doesn’t even dance well!”

“Ah, but...I don’t think—”

“I mean, I’ve been longing to ask her to dance, but always refrained!”

I was busy thinking of ways to cover for Viol, when Riesz let something slip that bowled me over.

“Riesz, surely not you, too...”

This was *not* the time to spring something like this on me.

...Ah, but hold on a moment. If Lady Seren married Riesz, then our family

would gain her...and that would strengthen our position...

The palace had a lot of talented people, but the loss of Lady Seren from its staff would be great. No doubt the stress would increase my risk of prematurely balding. But if I could still make good use of this excellent human resource, then the situation might still have some merit.

The success of an establishment depends on its personnel. I believed Riesz to be a capable younger brother. But if he teamed up with Lady Seren, they would form a perfectly balanced pair.

Ah, but what am I doing, thinking such self-serving thoughts?

“So...you’ve fallen for Lady Seren too, Riesz...”

Riesz hung his head low, nodding almost imperceptibly. My younger brother was a sensible young man. He couldn’t tell Lady Seren how he felt as long as she was engaged to the prince. That was why he was focusing his rage on Viol instead, for stealing a dance Riesz felt he should’ve had. *Poor lovesick boy.*

I felt sorrier for myself. Now I had one more thing to worry about.

I patted Riesz soothingly on the head, thinking a mile a minute. I thought so hard I almost made myself dizzy. *Who should I support here? No, no... I feel sorry about it, but I can’t support any of them.* I sighed again, before reaching a subdued conclusion.

Right, I’ll leave well enough alone for now. Only fools rush in.

There was still a year left until Prince Helios’s Birth Festival, during which his engagement to Lady Seren would be internationally announced. Which meant there were only six months left until preparations for the festivities began and invitations were sent out to foreign dignitaries.

I’d assess the situation, see what was best for everyone involved, including Lady Seren, then do my best to facilitate a favorable outcome.

Lady Seren, what a sinful temptress you are...

Seren 7

Midnight Tea Party

“HAAAAAH...”

I flung myself onto the bed and sighed deeply.

What was all that tonight? I’ve never attended a more exhausting ball!

All that dancing was part of my tiredness, admittedly. But more than that, it was dealing with all the questions people bombarded me with.

They had swarmed around me, curious expressions on their faces. But I couldn’t really answer any of their questions. After all, I didn’t even know myself why so many gentlemen had asked me to dance tonight.

I had made my way back to the buffet tables and was hoping to take a breather when I was swarmed. In the end, it was Prince Helios who came to my rescue.

“Seren, are you all right?” he asked as he spirited me away from the interested crowd. No one would dare interrupt the crown prince. Thanks to him, I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief.

“I saw you being barraged with questions, and you looked uncomfortable. So I just had to come over and barge in,” Prince Helios said as we walked together.

“Thank you very much! You honestly saved me,” I said gratefully.

“You must be very tired.”

“Yes. All the pressure from everyone’s questions was a lot to take. And I couldn’t even answer them! I have absolutely no idea why I was asked to dance so much tonight!”

“Your face is a little red. How about getting some cool air on the balcony? Oh! Or do you prefer to sit after all that dancing?” he asked, being incredibly considerate.

“I’d love to just sit, but I can’t really relax with everyone watching me this way.”

I could still feel everyone’s gazes burning into my back. I felt like no matter what I did the rest of the night—no matter *who* I was with—I’d continue to be

the center of attention.

So I decided to rely on Prince Helios's kindness and retire from the ball. He had me escorted back home not long after that.

Once I got home, I had Rince take off my dress and change me into casual eveningwear. After that, I could barely stand, so I flopped down on my bed and stretched out all my limbs.

If only I could stretch all the way out like Vi does. Ah, it'd be so nice to be a cat!

Adorable and flexible from his toes to his ears, with a perky tail...just looking at Vi always put me in a good mood. I couldn't be a cat like Vi, but I could still stretch out as much as I could. As I did, I heard my joints popping and cracking.

I must've been way tenser than I thought! Uh-oh, it won't do to fall straight asleep. I needed to bathe first. But I was so tired...and I was so sleepy...

"Lady Seren."

I heard a light knock and opened my eyes. *I must've fallen asleep...*

"...What is it?"

"Lady Marietta's here to see you. Should I send her away?"

Rince must've heard the sleepiness in my voice and was trying to be considerate. But I was glad she'd woken me up. *I'd rather not pass out in bed without washing up first.*

Besides, Marietta always came to my room after every ball so we could talk about it. We would report on the things we'd each seen that night while sipping tea and enjoying a light snack. It was like a little tea party where we shared information; I always looked forward to it.

"No," I said, "send her in."

"Certainly."

The door opened and Marietta entered with a light step.

She must've danced much more than me, but she didn't look tired at all. She really had a lot of stamina. Even though I'd cast my rejuvenation spell on

myself, I still felt mentally wiped out.

“You look very perky, Marietta,” I remarked.

“Oh!” she laughed. “I dance that much every time.” She then reached for the tea and snacks that Rince had prepared for us.

“Thank you, Rince,” she said. “I’m *always* ever so busy dancing at balls, I never even get to touch the buffet. I’m starving! Ah, but I shouldn’t...if I eat this late at night, I’ll regret it.”

But even as she said that, she reached for one of the scones. *She really must be hungry...*

“You can stand to eat a few scones after all that dancing,” I said.

“I wish! But more importantly, Sis...what a night it was for you! You’re all anyone’s talking about!”

I cringed. *I knew it...*

I went home earlier than anyone else tonight, but apparently, the gossip had kept churning in my absence. No doubt I would have to deal with probing questions for a while...

“I’ll have a tough time of it tomorrow...” I murmured.

“Oh well, it can’t be helped!” Marietta chirped as she kept nibbling. “I mean, *the* Frosty Archmage Viol, Prime Minister Borden, Riesz, and even Mashlo—all of them are notorious for never even going near the dance floor! And they’re all so popular with the ladies...”

“Yes, you’re right,” I recalled. “I’m certain I’ve never seen any of them on the dance floor.”

“Right?! Everyone was *furious*, watching you hog all those fine men for yourself. Personally, I got a huge kick out of it!”

Marietta grinned in visible enjoyment. My sister was always smiling. Whenever I saw her do so, I always felt strangely cheered up.

“Hey, Sis?” Marietta asked suddenly.

“Yes?”

“What kind of magic did you cast to bring all of them out onto the dance floor with you?”

The word “magic” made me grin.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I smirked.

“Oh, you liar. No one’s ever seen Lord Viol, that stone statue of a man, crack so much as a smile, let alone *beam* like that! Come on, Sis, tell me!”

“So *that’s* how everyone talks about Lord Viol...” I replied. “But he’s kind. He noticed I’m not in the best of health, so he’s been teaching me some simple magic.”

“*Hmph!* Don’t dodge the subject.” Marietta pursed her lips and pretended to sulk adorably. It was her best trick and she’d used it since we were kids to get me to do what she wanted. But I really didn’t have any answers for her.

I thought about it a moment, before I spoke. “I think that Lord Viol...just wanted to check and see if I was able to use the spells he taught me properly.”

We had made our little deal, and even though Lord Viol stood to gain nothing from it, he’d dispatched his adorable little black cat familiar to me. I felt sure he was the kind of person who followed through on his responsibilities.

No doubt he’d wanted to check that Vi was teaching me properly and that my progress was proceeding apace. I hadn’t seen him since the day he’d given me that stack of books. *Perhaps he’s been worried...*

“But why would he ask you to dance?” Marietta mused. “Why not just strike up a normal conversation?”

“I don’t really know why, either,” I replied. “But maybe...” I mused, “he needed to touch my hand to know if the magic was flowing properly or... something like that.”

“Or *something like that?*”

Marietta puffed out her cheeks indignantly. *But I really don’t know any more than that!*

“So then...” she went on, “what about Prime Minister Borden?”

“Lord Viol stepped on my toe and Prince Helios gave him a warning. I think Borden came over to diffuse the tension. He and Lord Viol are good friends, apparently.”

“What about Riesz, then? I always see you two talking, but he never goes near the dance floor.”

“Riesz is Borden’s younger brother. Borden must’ve asked him to take over.”

Marietta’s cheeks puffed out even further. “Then what about *Mashlo?!* ” she cried. “You think Riesz asked him to take over after that?”

“It didn’t seem that way...”

“Then he must’ve *really* wanted to dance with you...”

“I really don’t know what Mashlo was up to,” I protested. “Maybe he needed a practice partner. He probably wants to dance with *you*, Marietta, but doesn’t know the steps. He was probably afraid he’d stomp on your feet if he asked you.”

“Sis!!!”

Why is Marietta getting so angry? I’d never seen her act this scary before, except for all the times she’d scolded me for staying up all night and wrecking my looks. I felt flustered.

“You *seriously* think that’s what happened?!” she cried. “That’s so incredibly rude and disrespectful to people who actually plucked up the courage and asked you to dance!”

Er, that is what I thought happened! But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to fling wood on the fire.

“Listen, Sis!” Marietta snapped. “*Dancing* is something you ask someone to do when you want to get closer to them! It’s something you invite people to do with you *when you like them!*”

She lunged across the table and grabbed both my hands. Her expression was stern yet impassioned.

“Which *means* allll the men who asked you to dance tonight have *feelings* for you!!!”

She got to her feet, still clutching my hands and practically shouting. I was stunned and couldn't say anything in response.

I mean...think of all the balls I have attended before now. No one's ever asked me to dance before. None of what she's saying sounds like reality. She's a romantic, of course; that's all!

"You don't believe me?" she said, clearly reading my silence for incredulity. "Well, *think* about it! You're Prince Helios's fiancée! So even though they wanted to ask you to dance, they *had* to hold back! But Lord Viol was the first one to break the ice, which gave the rest the courage to stop holding back."

Borden's a different story. But is it possible that Riesz and Mashlo have been holding back on asking me to dance...? No, no! Definitely not Riesz and definitely not Mashlo! After all, he's head over heels for you, Marietta!

"You have an amazing fiancé in Prince Helios," she went on. "So everyone knows you could never return their feelings. But what if...they wrestled with these feelings—feelings they couldn't express—for so long... Then finally... *finally*, they couldn't take it anymore and just had to ask you to dance..."

Her voice dropped an octave, making me blink.

"It takes *courage* to ask a lady to dance! I want you to at least consider and appreciate these brave men's feelings..."

I studied her sad expression. *For Marietta to get this emotional has to mean she's in the throes of unrequited love herself... And quite possibly, her affections are for...well, it must be Prince Helios...mustn't it? After all, he's the only man she's ever asked to dance.*

As the thought occurred to me, I found myself speaking without thinking.

"Is it the same for you, Marietta?"

"...!"

Her eyes widened in shock and her hands trembled. She took her hands off mine and clasped them to her chest.

Ah. As I thought.

"Marietta, are you..."

“No! Please don’t ask!”

Her teary face shut my mouth.

“Please...” she begged, “please don’t ask me a question I can’t answer...”

But her face told me everything I needed to know.

There was no doubt in my mind. Marietta loved Prince Helios. And she had loved him for a very, very long time.



LATER that night, I lay down in bed again and began turning it all over in my head.

Marietta changed the subject after that to enlighten me on the unspoken rules and etiquette of balls. She was worried that I might find myself asked to dance by many men from now on.

Mostly, the people who deigned to dance at balls were single and actively looking for a spouse. Dancing frivolously with someone you didn’t at least see as a potential option just wasn’t done.

“You know how it’s frowned upon to dance more than one dance with the same partner?” Marietta asked me. “You also have to plan it out carefully to avoid dancing with the same person each time there’s a ball, too.”

For her part, Marietta had initially agreed to dance with any man who asked her. But some men insisted on asking her over and over to the point where rumors would start. As she explained it, she’d learned it was best to cast a wide net at the balls and make sure to dance with different people each time.

Of course, it’s just like diplomacy, I thought, getting it immediately.

“Everyone who finds themselves starting to favor a certain person makes sure to monitor their dance floor movements,” Marietta went on. “It’s like a battleground out there for people hoping to get married.”

She spoke emphatically, explaining that, after each dance, the girls always gathered to swap information. Who danced with who the most times? Who moved to the tables and chatted together? Who went out onto the balcony and spoke romantic things? All these questions were asked and the answers shared.

“A lot of girls drop hints to keep others away from the guy they have their eye on,” she concluded.

It sounded like a battle won or lost on key information alone.

I had wondered aloud why Prince Helios, who *had* a fiancée already, always had a line of girls wanting to dance with him. But Marietta claimed there was a good reason.

“Prince Helios is a gentleman, he’s handsome, and he’s a great dancer, isn’t he? A lot of ladies would *love* to just dance with him. But the pluckiest young ladies dance with him for their future husbands’ sake.”

She giggled before continuing, “They all feign ignorance about what they’re *really* trying to achieve. But...if they can prove to the prince that they’re witty and sociable, he’ll see them as fine wives and remember their husbands once they’re married. And *that* will raise their future husband’s status, see?”

In our kingdom, women’s social momentum had certainly come a long way over the centuries. But most aristocratic women still ended up running the household once married, while the men were the ones involved in state matters.

Naturally, men favored wives who knew how to communicate and forge good social relations, elevating their husbands. To that end, even if they themselves weren’t so calculated as to be aware of what they were doing, young women nonetheless did their best to be socially aware and to do whatever they could to bolster their future husbands... *Apparently*.

I could understand the sentiment. That was a major part of why I’d thrown myself so deeply into my princess consort training.

“No one would think to be jealous of *you*,” Marietta went on, “since you’re so firmly established as Prince Helios’s fiancée. But even so, they don’t like to see you dancing capriciously with other men.”

She got to her feet and then giggled teasingly. “Looks like I’ve one *more* thing I need to start advising you on!”

In truth, up till now, Marietta had always advised me on one thing or another. But she was always acting in my best interest and was always kind about it.

I cast a quick rejuvenation spell on Marietta before seeing her off to her own rooms.

After my bath and nighttime skincare routine, I slumped into bed, my mind a whirl of thoughts.

At the very least, I now knew for sure how Marietta felt.

She would often lose interest in things halfway, but she'd do her best when it aided something she liked. When she had taken dance lessons, she'd found it difficult and painful and had cried many times. But she never gave up and stuck with it to the end.

Princess consort training would be tougher still, but if she truly loved Prince Helios as much as her expressions showed, then no doubt she could even endure that.

And based on our conversation tonight, I felt sure she'd do a much finer job as this kingdom's queen than I ever could.

A queen's main role is to support the king. I was good at diplomatic relations and business matters, and that was important, of course. But the queen also had to attend every ball and keep all the other wives in check. She needed to earn their trust and respect. That was clear to me now. But to be honest, I always had trouble getting along with others socially.

I knew all about affairs of state. I took the time to research the other countries' cultures so that I could find common ground and make negotiations that would benefit both our lands. Trade, diplomacy...I *loved* all of that.

But dealing with all the interpersonal stuff... Conversing at balls, trying to discern the truth behind each person's personal interpretation of things... I was *terrible* at all of that. I felt certain my own inferiority complex had something to do with it.

I always felt terrible about myself when surrounded by confident, beautiful young girls, laughing and dancing and enjoying themselves.

Of course, there were ways around it. The current queen wasn't much of a partygoer, so she held subdued tea parties during which bonds could be strengthened. As a result, high society's current state was mostly peaceful.

Each historical queen had her own way of doing things. Some were glamorous, appearing resplendent in gorgeous gowns and the latest fashions and being called a beautiful flower by all at court. Using the rumor mill to further her own aims. Yes, if you looked back, there were multiple ways to be a queen. The issue lay in doing too much of what didn't suit you and exhausting yourself.

If I was queen, I'd be the subdued tea party type, while Marietta would be the sociable, gorgeous type.

But even so...was what Marietta said true? I wondered. *The men I danced with tonight...do they all really have feelings for me?* I just couldn't believe it.

But...what if?

If this really *was* true, did that mean their feelings wouldn't change, even if my engagement to Prince Helios was canceled?

Perhaps, like other young unmarried ladies, I should look toward using these balls as a place to meet my own future husband.

For a moment, I recalled Lord Viol, dancing so solemnly, and I felt my cheeks burn.

Just thinking about him was terribly embarrassing! Quickly, I cast the rejuvenation spell over my entire body to knock myself out so I could rest instead.



THE next morning, I awoke feeling as fresh as ever thanks to my rejuvenation spell.

Today was a bright and sunny day. The bedchamber was filled with light and that alone put me in a great mood. It was strange how that happened.

My body felt no lingering signs of exhaustion either. When I looked in the mirror as Rince was dressing me, I realized that my skin was glowing. *Yes, Marietta complimented it last night, didn't she? She always was scolding me about the state of my skin, so to get rare praise from her really makes me smile.*

Yes, the thought of Marietta reminded me. *I have to be careful as I make it*

through another day at the academy.

I danced with several partners last night, so I should be careful not to be seen talking to any of them at the academy today. Or so Marietta had warned me. She also told me that to avoid rumors in particular, I should generally keep my distance from other boys and remember I was Prince Helios's fiancée.

I chuckled to myself.

For my little sister to be worrying about such things...I've really failed at the big sister role, haven't I?

Four years ago, when I debuted into high society, I remembered my mother giving me a similar lecture. But no one had ever asked me to dance since, so I'd ended up forgetting all about it. *Perhaps I should turn to Marietta for advice on everything I go through going forward.* I felt guilty for not being a reliable big sister.

I headed off to the academy, feeling as though I could've done better.



“SO tired...”

I surprised myself by groaning as I walked down the corridor to the salon.

Today really *was* terrible, though. The whole time I was at the academy, I was besieged by an endless barrage of young ladies who all came over and wanted to question me. Honestly, the whole thing was intimidating

Marietta was always the topic of some form of gossip or another, so she dealt with this kind of thing all the time. That was no doubt why she'd lectured me. Thinking of my sister's kindness went a long way toward making me feel better.

But really? Why's everyone so obsessed with me...?

It was Lord Viol they grilled me on, more than anything.

They wanted to know how we knew one another, what I'd said to make Lord Viol laugh that way, what his interests and hobbies were, if he'd mentioned any preferences in a woman's physical features, and on and on. I couldn't answer any of them! I just stood there awkwardly.

What I learned from all of this, though, was that Lord Viol was immensely, *immensely* popular among the ladies.

I always thought being popular with the opposite sex was a good thing, a sign that you were charming. But all this fuss was terrible.

All I could say to the other young women was that I'd try asking Lord Viol the next time I saw him. But I knew no such chance would come. Even if I *did* see him, I didn't want them to know about it. So I wouldn't be responding to any of their questions any time soon. That was for sure!

Ah, but perhaps I should mention something to Vi. I'm sure Lord Viol noticed all the eyes on him at the ball. Perhaps he ought to be informed.

"Seren." I heard a voice behind me while I was deep in thought. I turned to see Riesz approaching with a warm smile. "Thank you for last night."

Riesz was very socially aware. That must've been why he hadn't tried to talk to me at the academy. Or maybe he couldn't get close because of all the girls around me. No doubt he was doing his best to avoid the rumor mill, like Marietta had said.

"No, thank you!" I replied. "I was really able to calm down with you."

"I'm glad."

Riesz opened the door for me in a casual yet gallant way. *He's always so nice.* I peeked up at him from under my lashes as I went through the door, and he looked down at me with a big warm smile, just like always.

Marietta had said otherwise, but there was no way Riesz had feelings for me. *Or at least, it's impossible to tell.* Just as I was thinking that, he spoke again.

"The truth is...I've wanted to ask you to dance for a long time, Seren. I'm very glad I got the chance last night."

I blinked, looking up at him again. Riesz said he was glad. But for some reason, he looked doleful, almost sad. I wasn't sure what to say for a moment.

"You could have asked me," I replied. "I would have danced with you any time."

"Thank you. But you're Prince Helios's fiancée, so I couldn't muster up the

courage to be the first man to ask you for a dance. I suppose that means Lord Viol isn't afraid of anything."

"Ah... Seren!" Mashlo called out, interrupting my conversation with Riesz. I was surprised to see that his entire group of friends was present in the salon already, along with Prince Helios, of course. They always showed up long after I did, so what was going on today?

"Wh-What are you doing with Riesz...?" Mashlo sputtered.

"We just ran into one another in the corridor." Riesz smiled at his friend, who seemed somehow flustered. It always struck me what an odd pairing they were. Mashlo, who'd run over to greet Riesz and I at the door, now paused and looked down at me, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly.

That was unusual, too. Usually, he was the kind of person who always spoke his mind.

"L-Lady Seren, I...I apologize for my poor dancing last night," he stammered.

"Oh, please don't worry about it!" I said. "I had fun too, uh, avoiding your feet. It kept me on my toes the whole time!"

It was also rare for Mashlo to apologize to me about anything. The thought made me smile. At this, he suddenly went bright red.

"Mashlo," Riesz tutted. "You really *should* learn to dance a bit better before you hit the floor again. I know Lord Viol was bad, too. But you really put in a poor showing for an aristocrat, you know."

"Yes, please take some lessons! Seren's ability to walk may depend upon it," Prince Helios joined in the ribbing along with Riesz. When we entered the room, he seemed to have been engaged in clerical work. But now, he was standing over by the door with us, looking at me with concern. "Is your foot all right?"

Apparently, he was still worried about the foot Lord Viol had stepped on the previous night. But he'd only stepped on it very lightly. Honestly, it was absolutely fine.

Prince Helios 1

Is This Jealousy?

THE moment I saw Seren walk into the salon with Riesz, both of them gazing at each other, deep in conversation, I felt a twinge deep in my chest. I had seen them chatting together so often, but this time, I felt I couldn't look away. Then Mashlo rushed over to Seren, and before I knew what I was doing, I was getting out of my seat and hurrying over there as well.

"Wh-What are you doing with Riesz...?"

Up close now, I could see Mashlo was immediately interrogating Riesz. Mashlo was often hot-headed like this, but Riesz was used to him and simply smiled.

"We just ran into one another in the corridor," he said brightly.

I found myself feeling relieved. *Oh, good. So Seren and Riesz haven't been together since class then.*

Seren was six months older than me, so we were in different grades at the academy. Seren and Riesz were both fifth-years while I was a fourth-year. It was normal for them to have arrived at the same time, and I felt a sense of jealousy toward Riesz for sharing a grade with her.

"L-Lady Seren, I...I apologize for my poor dancing last night."

Mashlo was apologizing to Seren, which was unlike him. And his dancing was, indeed, terrible. He never ventured onto the dance floor, and it showed. No doubt Seren had to utilize some quick footwork to avoid his big, stomping feet. But now she was smiling, as if pleased by his apology.

"Oh, please don't worry about it! I had fun too, uh, avoiding your feet. It kept me on my toes the whole time!"

Then it happened. Mashlo blushed bright red, down to his neck. I blinked at him, on the alert now.

Wh-Why is he blushing like that? Isn't Marietta the one he has a big crush on?!

But he *was* blushing, and clearly in response to Seren's beautiful smile. Blushing, stuttering, avoiding her gaze...all textbook signs. He was acting like a blushing young maiden in love.

"Mashlo," Riesz tutted. "You really *should* learn to dance a bit better before you hit the floor again. I know Lord Viol was bad, too. But you really put in a poor showing for an aristocrat, you know."

He delivered this crushing remark to Mashlo as I stood by, scrutinizing that blushing face. Riesz rolled his eyes, but not before I caught the look of them. *Ice cold*. Something was up with him, although I had no idea what.

Riesz was right, though. I joined in a little, briefly teasing Mashlo. Then I turned my attention to Seren. She had danced so much last night and seemed so tired now. And dancing with so many unskilled dancers, her poor feet must've gotten quite stomped on.

"Is your foot all right?" I asked her.

"Oh, I was only lightly stepped on. It's totally fine. Anyway, you and Marietta both danced much longer than I did last night. You always do! I really realized how amazing you both are to be able to do that."

She gazed upon me, and I felt like a sunbeam was shining into my heart.

I have always thought of dancing as being part of my princely duties. I learn the noblewomen's faces, their names, their ways of dancing, speech, and interests. I accept all dance offers from dukes' daughters, one in every two offers from the counts' daughters, and one in three from the barons'. I spend at least half of every ball dancing with women and the other half exchanging information with prominent aristocrats at tables.

It was expected of me. I received no praise if I did it and criticism if I didn't. Rules governed my attendance at the balls. As such, it was a place of anxiety for me. I still hadn't reached the point where, like Father or Mother, I could find enjoyment in social events.

Maybe that was why Seren's casual compliment resonated with me so much.

“Seren...thank you.”

“...I didn’t really do anything worth thanking, though.”

Her dainty smile was charming. *Ah, here we go again. Ever since we went on our date, I’ve been filled with waves of this feeling I’ve never experienced before.*

I never would’ve imagined asking Seren on a date or going out for fun myself. I even went without sleep sometimes; I spent every spare moment working to better myself as a prince and future king, for the good of the country. That was my role. And, having watched how hard Seren worked too, I never wanted to distract or burden her.

People often told me about how important it was to strengthen bonds with others and to enjoy breaks every now and then. But...Seren and I would spend decades living together. Right now, we both had our studies to focus on, and I’d always been sure that once we were married, we’d be able to speak plenty. *I was so...foolish to think that way!*

Maybe it was being released from princess consort training that’d done it... but Seren was really looking beautiful lately.

I liked her solemn face when she was deep in clerical work and her tense expression when discussing important matters. I also liked the shy smile she sometimes wore when we found a chance to speak. But she’d never looked more beautiful than on our date.

She had looked so cute, her eyes sparkling as she gazed around at the journals and books in the shop. She looked so innocent, and I realized that the smile she showed when it was just us was so incredibly pure.

When I announced I’d buy her the glass pen to remember the occasion, she chose a pen with ink the color of my eyes. It made my chest burn inside.

Such fun we had...and all I’d had to do was ask her out! I deeply regretted all the time I’d squandered and the chances I’d blown. I wanted to see more of that innocent smile, the one she only showed when we were alone together.

I wanted more time for just us two. We— I needed that.

But then, at the ball, when so many men had asked her to dance, starting with

Lord Viol of all people, I was flustered. And then there was the way Mashlo had reacted just now...

All the time he'd spent raving about Marietta's beauty, her kindness, her loveliness, and sparkling aura. How he'd double down in intensity if anyone ever challenged him on it. Since when had he changed his tune?

This burning feeling in my chest...this feeling I've never felt before...this must be jealousy.

It was maybe years too late, but there was no doubt: I had fallen madly in love with Seren.

Viol 7

My Idea of Heaven

HMM, what to do?

I was on the ledge near Lady Seren's window, strolling back and forth, leaning against the glass, craning my neck to look in the window and flapping my tail. All I had to do was show myself fully in the window and she'd run over. I knew that. But...now that I'd realized how I felt about her, it felt awkward entering her chambers.

I feel so stupid; I'm twenty-five years old and too shy to show myself. But I'm socially awkward! And I've never been interested in a girl before. So, please give me a break, brain!

My mind was a mess. I looked up at the window.

I wanted to see her. I wanted to see her beautiful face. I wanted her to stroke my fur with her soft hands. But I was...too embarrassed to see her.

Damnit! This feeling is monstrous. And yet somehow...I'm so happy!

Now that I was aware of how I felt, I felt...guilty somehow, entering her chambers like this.

Hmm. What to do, what to do?

While I stood there ruminating, the nearby window opened with a bang. I almost fell off the ledge...then froze as I made eye contact with the window-opener. Lady Seren!

"Vi! Oh good, you're here!"

She held out a hand to me and I slowly slunk over. Then she'd grabbed me and was holding me tight.

Too close! Way too close!

Don't squeeze my cheeks! Don't rub my belly! Don't whisper "I've missed you" in my ear!

I scrabbled and squirmed, embarrassed, but she had a tight grip and wouldn't let me go.

“Awww, Vi! The smell of you is sooooo soothing!”

Those words drove me even crazier. *I’m still young! I shouldn’t smell at all!* I was sure my scent couldn’t really be pleasant to a young woman. But Lady Seren hugged me close, even as I squirmed and wriggled like an eel.

Once she’d wiped off all my paws, making sure to wipe around each individual toe, she finally released me.

I was exhausted. Just when I was debating the morals of this whole “Vi” situation! Well, I’ll agonize no more! For I, too, have been subjected to a great personal injustice!

“Aaaaah! I finally got to snuggle you to my heart’s content, Vi!” she squealed.

“Please tone it down...”

“But it’s been three whole days since I last saw you!”

Her hand crept closer again, and I darted backward, out of reach. My heart couldn’t take another snuggling!

“Three days...but last night, we—” I clamped my furry lips shut. I was the only one who knew we’d met last night. Goodness, I almost gave the game away! “L-Last night we...” I stammered. “I mean, uhhh...last night, you and my master, uhhhhhhh...you saw my master,” I finished lamely.

“Yes!” she squealed again. “He actually asked me to dance! Can you believe it?! Lord Viol was so wonderful!”

“Ah... I-Is that so?”

“I think his dance teacher must’ve been Count Blaze,” Lady Seren mused. “He’s a tough teacher and he kicks out every student not prepared to put in the effort! Lord Viol must’ve trained very hard!”

“Y-You know who taught him?!”

“Technique tells all, you see,” she grinned a little pridefully.

That reminded me. Last night, after dancing with Borden and me, she’d also danced with Riesz...and the redheaded boy (Mashlo?), who was an even worse dancer than me. Was she all right? I knew I had set the chain in motion, but I

never expected her younger sister's biggest fan to get involved. I felt rather guilty about what I had caused.

"More importantly," I asked firmly, "were you all right last night? My master apparently stepped on your foot, then he said you danced with some clumsy redhead. It sounds terrible."

"Hehe! You sound like Prince Helios."

Guh... So His Royal Highness said something similar, eh? I was lacking practice. But based on the prince's reaction, he was also more enamored with Seren than he was with Marietta, just like the redhead boy. Or was this normal behavior, given that she was his fiancée? I didn't know anyone else in an arranged engagement, nor did I know much of the aristocracy's ins and outs. What was normal for these people? I'd caused a ripple in the ocean, but I was too uneducated to discern the meaning of the waves. An issue for next time.

"I appreciate the concern," Lady Seren said serenely.

She stroked my fur ever so softly. It felt so good, my eyes narrowed to slits, and I very nearly fell asleep. I stepped back earlier! When did she close the gap between us again? I really have to keep more control over myself, or I'll start purring! *PURRING!*

"But you know," she went on, "I managed to dodge Lord Viol pretty easily until the end. And he didn't even put any weight into it the one time I failed to dodge, so it didn't hurt a bit."

"Really? That's good then."

Her words were a relief. If she was saying it to an (as far as she knew) uninvolved third party, then it must be true. I was a little worried she was still just trying to make Lord Viol feel better by downplaying her injury.

"And well...it's true Lord Mashlo isn't much of a dancer, but I managed to avoid his feet for the most part. No problem there either. It kept me on my toes the whole time."

Kept her on her toes? That didn't sound problem-free to me... But no matter...

"I'm glad, then," I said as calmly as I could. "But please let me ask just in

case...have you changed your mind about wanting to become a High Mage?"

"Oh Vi, you do ask such funny things," Lady Seren chuckled. But it was a major concern of mine. I pricked up my ears, looking right at her, and was surprised to see her gazing solemnly back at me. "Nothing's changed regarding my desire to become a High Mage. If anything, my will's only grown stronger."

She smiled, but I could see the determination in her eyes. She hadn't balled up her fists or yelled—just smiled—but I could see the unwavering determination within her.

"That's good. Then let us begin."

"Yes, sir!" Lady Seren replied, suddenly serious.

I cast the barrier spell like always, then said, "In just three more weeks—once Windber starts—let's aim to get you fighting your first magical beast."

"...Okay!" She swallowed audibly.

"Luckily," I went on, "you are an excellent student. You have a great deal of talent when it comes to memorizing magical technique, polishing it, and advancing it. Take the time to memorize and then produce good results during the battle."

"I hope I can," she said a little nervously.

"I've revised the curriculum a little based on your inventiveness and adaptability."

"Oh, my! Is it all right if I ask for more details?"

"Of course. If your Wind Cutter and barrier spells have been polished to satisfaction, then I was thinking of adding another elemental subspell. Although...I think this may be stretching you to your limits."

"Adding a subspell? Is it another form of wind magic? Or a different element altogether?" she asked.

"Any element besides your specialty is called a subspell. In your case, your specialty is wind, so the subsPELLS would be either fire, water, or earth. Wind is where you're strongest, so I intend to teach you a subspell to complement your Wind Cutter."

“I like the sound of that.”

“There may be magical beasts that wind spells have no effect on. Or they might have such thick hides that Wind Cutter can’t penetrate. It’s cases like these where you need a subspell to fall back on,” I explained.

“You’re right. I don’t even know what kind of magical beast will appear.” Lady Seren frowned. No doubt she was picturing herself fighting such a beast.

“But if it’s a spell you lack aptitude in,” I went on, “then the results may disappoint. We don’t have much time to waste teaching you the wrong thing by trial and error.”

“Which is why you said you would only teach me if I polished up my other spells first?” she asked.

“Precisely. But watching you, I changed my way of thinking. Let’s do away with the subspell this time. You can learn one at your leisure later on, once you’ve become a High Mage.”

“D-Do away with it...?”

Lady Seren looked daunted. But I was confident. *The magic technique I’m about to teach you will bring out your strength for sure!*

“Instead, I’ll teach you some fascinating spells. So don’t worry! I’m certain you’ll like it,” I said with the utmost confidence.

Lady Seren giggled all of a sudden.

“What is it?” I asked, confused.

“You little black cat,” she sighed. “You’re always so sweet...but sometimes, you seem so cool and reliable, too.”

“Is... Is that so?” I replied softly.

I wished she wouldn’t say things like that: I didn’t know how to react. Seeing Lady Seren giggling and looking so happy, I felt embarrassed. If I was human, I’d have cleared my throat and looked away. But as a cat, I wasn’t sure how to feign nonchalance; in truth, I hadn’t a clue.

I settled for whacking my tail on the table two or three times, then facing

Lady Seren again.

“Erm...let’s continue. Over the next three weeks, I’ll have you studying three things. The first is using Wind Cutter and the rejuvenation spell together. I’d like for you to try that today, in fact.”

“All right! Just leave it to me.”

In truth, I wasn’t worried one bit about that. I had the feeling she could probably do that already. That’s how astounding her growth had been.

“Using multiple spells in tandem is very dangerous,” I warned. “So I don’t want you trying it when I’m not around. Once you’ve mastered this step, I’ll teach you that fascinating new magic I mentioned.”

“Oh, I can’t wait!”

“I’ll teach you all the ins and outs of how to cast a protective barrier last. So don’t worry.”

“Okay. I trust you, teacher.”

“Good. Now let’s get on with it. Cast your rejuvenation spell, then try casting Wind Cutter on top of it.”

“Okay!”

No sooner had she said this than Lady Seren was conjuring her Wind Cutter blades, flinging them into the barrier with a cacophony of sound.

Well...just as I thought!

I had no complaints about her rejuvenation spell or Wind Cutter. Both spells were steady with no variations and perfectly cast.

Extreme concentration was needed for each spell. Casting two at once was next-level stuff. At first, she’d struggled with balance, favoring one over the other, which led to either an explosive imbalance or failure to conjure either one at all. Now, though, she cast like a seasoned Mage.

“How’s that?” she asked.

“Hmm... Just as I predicted. It was splendid.”

She performed both spells perfectly in tandem; I had to give her the honest

praise she was due.

Through trial and error, adjusting and readjusting the Wind Cutter's power output, she'd now achieved a steady balance. I told her she was amazing, and I meant it, but Lady Seren now looked at me with mild confusion.

"Well," she said. "I've done my best to learn to do different things while holding my rejuvenation spell steady in the background. All I'm doing now is just that, but other magic."

Well, yeah, that was all she was doing, but it was more difficult than it sounded. No student at the Magic Academy would ever be this modest. I sighed, mildly exasperated.

"You pass. Now I'll teach you a new form of magic... A very fascinating one."

"Really?! Oh, thank you, Vi!"

Lady Seren was so excited she was practically skipping as I began explaining the next form of magic. But then her head tilted to one side as she listened to me.

"Hey, Vi. Did you just say 'True Wind?'"

"I did indeed. It's a wind that blows straight and true, hence the name."

"That's wind magic, isn't it? But...it's not meant for offensive purposes, right?" she asked.

"Right, that's what makes it so interesting. As you've already noted, True Wind is classified as a lifestyle magic. There are many potential uses," I explained. "Gathering together fallen leaves without raking them. Blowing a fire to life. Nothing particularly life-changing, though. Honestly, it's a piffling little spell... It conjures a breeze and lets one direct it at will. It's a very simple spell."

"But the books say," Lady Seren replied, "that it's the most basic of wind magic, with hardly any magic power needed to conjure it."

"Indeed! It's so simple they don't even teach it at the Magic Academy. Students are expected to already be familiar with it. Other spells like Wind Cutter, for example, are taught to learn proper wind manipulation. But while it may be weak, that doesn't mean it isn't absolutely fundamental. In fact, True

Wind can be said to be the basis for all other wind magic.”

“So you’re saying major spells like Tornado or Jet Storm are all based on True Wind?”

“But of course! Scholars began by studying magic to swirl fallen leaves from the ground and, over time, refined that into Tornado. All powerful attack spells evolved into great displays of power. But their fundamentals leave no scope for inventiveness. True Wind’s fascinating: it seems very basic and yet contains so much potential for creativity,” I said enthusiastically.

“...I had no idea it was so useful.” Lady Seren seemed to be ruminating about what I just said.

I understood why, it was hard to grasp the implications just from a simple explanation.

“Hmm, perhaps it’d be faster to show you. Lady Seren, would you mind picking me up?”

“Gladly!”

She walked over, looking delighted, and picked me up. I was at eye level with her now. I cast a barrier spell around the table’s surface and filled it with conjured sand and pebbles. In essence, I built a small desert on the tabletop, complete with a tiny oasis.

Lady Seren seemed surprised by the little desert terrarium I’d just constructed. Her arms tightened around me. I looked up at her and realized her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“Wowwww! Amazing, Vi! How did you do that? It’s like you’re a god constructing a tiny world!”

“This is easy enough,” I said matter-of-factly, “once you’ve mastered earth and water magic.”

But it wasn’t the desert I wanted her to focus on.

“Watch closely. I shall conjure a small tornado.”

And so, I conjured a small tornado in the desert terrarium. I used Tornado but on a very small, gentle scale. It was easy enough with plenty of practice.

My cute little tornado spun across the tiny desert, kicking up sand.

Pebbles and sand went flying in all directions as the spinning cyclone cut a path through the desert, leaving a deep furrow in the sand dune. The oasis lake grew smaller in diameter as the cyclone cut across it, splashing the water to one side.

I made the tiny tornado run from one end of the table to the other before looking up at Lady Seren again.

“Remember what this Tornado looks like. Its color.”

“All right. But why the color? I mean, it looks clear. Or more sort of gray...it’s hard to assign it a color.”

“Well, it is made of wind, after all.” Still speaking, I returned my focus to the tabletop desert. “Now, I shall repeat my demonstration using True Wind. Try to spot what’s different.”

“Okay,” she said as I cast True Wind and did the same thing with it as my Tornado.

“Oh!” Lady Seren cried. “The one before was more cylindrical, but this one’s more like a small whirlwind. It’s...wider!”

“Of course,” I replied. “I can make the cyclone more cylindrical by spinning it faster. But I’m casting it slowly so you can really see the difference. Take a closer look.”

No doubt Lady Seren would be able to repeat this herself after only one good glance.

I extended the True Wind’s size until it matched the tiny Tornado from before. But this time, I made the True Wind cyclone grow taller. As it proceeded, it clearly changed color. Sucking up the sand from the table made it turn yellow. Then it began to suck up the tiny pebbles, too. It even sucked up the tiny lake’s water particles, until it formed an indistinctive muddled hue.

“Wow!” she cried. “It’s sucking up parts of the environment...?”

“Indeed,” I replied. “Tornado forms a perfect cyclone which consists of only wind. It’s a complete spell. No matter how far it travels, its only purpose is to

blow away all matter. It never mixes matter into itself. But True Wind is a tiny whirlwind that sucks up all matter nearby and can create an actual sandstorm. Depending on the casting, you can add different elemental attributes.”

“I think I’ve figured out what you’re trying to say, Vi.”

“Have you? Good!”

I was relieved. Even if she didn’t fully grasp the concept, as long as she understood that different attributes could be included depending on the casting, well...that was all she needed to know.

“One more thing,” I added. “Tornado is high-tier magic. Only a chosen few can wield it. Without great power and mastery, the amount of force needed to conjure Tornado could be very destructive. You could even cause a natural disaster if you’re not careful. It’s not an easy spell to learn.”

“I see. I’ve never seen anything like that before! It’s a form of magic beyond my wildest dreams.”

“Right. Even I haven’t seen it cast outside of research and teaching purposes. But True Wind is very easy to wield. Anyone could learn to cast it with just a little basic magic knowledge.”

“But based on how you cast it...it could prove a force just as destructive as Tornado, couldn’t it?” she asked.

“Precisely. If you’re interested, then we could start studying True Wind right now. What do you say? It’s wind magic, so it’s in your wheelhouse. But there’s endless scope for experimentation.”

Lady Seren looked down at me, her face beaming.

“I’m very, very interested now! Professor Vi, please teach me all you know!”



“FINALLY, I made something that resembles a whirlwind...!”

It was daybreak when Lady Seren finally uttered those words.

“Good for you...!”

My voice came out weak and cracked. I wanted to praise her emphatically, of

course. But I didn't have the strength left.

She had mastered Wind Cutter in only an hour last time. And True Wind was a far more elementary form of magic than that. So I'd been expecting her to pick the latter up faster. Contrary to my expectations, though, it'd actually taken her several hours.

Come to think of it, she'd mastered the rejuvenation spell in just one night too. I'd almost forgotten about that; her growth had been so amazing since then. However, Lady Seren seemed to have more trouble casting spells she had trouble visualizing fully.

Perhaps Wind Cutter was easier for her, since it only involved visualizing blades.

Rejuvenation magic was more about the feel, though, so it'd taken her longer. Never before had I seen her practice as ferociously as she had tonight. No doubt once she'd grasped the root of True Wind, she'd proceed at a more rapid pace. At any rate, she'd certainly managed to construct something that resembled a whirlwind, and that was great progress.

"I'm so sorry, Vi! I was being terribly selfish." Snapping out of it finally, Lady Seren apologized in a tearful voice.

Unfair. How can I ever stay mad when she looks at me so...adorably?

I kept telling her to go to bed and she'd kept insisting on one more round. Again and again, we repeated this cycle. But now, it seemed the demons driving her to practice had finally left her body. The sky was already white overhead, and upon realizing she'd kept me here all night to train her, she was overcome with guilt.

Goodness. Have you always exerted yourself until the crack of dawn? That's youth for you.

"Hmm," I noted suddenly. "No sweets for me today?"

"Oh, but of course there is!" Lady Seren cried. "It's a new creation; the chef said he was very proud of it!"

"Then let that settle things between us," I replied. "Everything your family's

pâtissier makes is delectable.”

“Oh, thank you! I’m so glad to hear you say that. I’ve been putting in so many requests lately, the chef seems to have really gotten inspired to make desserts. He’s been outdoing himself! I bet if he knew how much you were enjoying them, he’d be even more thrilled!”

She smiled and it was like a meadow in bloom.

She went to fetch a small basket from the bedside table like she did every time. Then she placed the basket down in front of me. Before she even opened the lid, I could smell something amazing inside. I knew it was a masterpiece at first sniff!

“It smells...exquisite...!” I cried, trying not to drool.

“Hehe, Vi, your nose, ears, and whiskers are all quivering! Does it really smell that good?”

Chuckling, Lady Seren lifted the lid off the basket to reveal a dessert the likes of which I’d never seen before.

“It’s a tart base,” I remarked, “but...it doesn’t smell like cream cheese, does it?”

No, it was sweeter...more like vanilla.

And was that a hint of caramel I smelled? It smelled almost slightly burnt, but it oddly stimulated one’s appetite. I sniffed loudly.

What a bewitching aroma...!

Lady Seren lifted the tart up to my nose. The filling jiggled like a custard pudding. My eyes widened in delight.

It was a rich yellow color...and the way it was wobbling like that... Could it be...?

“Oh look,” Lady Seren said suddenly. “That’s unusual. The chef left a note. It says that since we seemed to like the sweet cheese tart the other day, he came up with a new kind of tart for us. Erm, apparently, it’s a...baked egg custard pudding tart. Oh, look! You’re supposed to drizzle this caramel sauce on it before you eat it.”

He's a...a genius! There's no way it's not a tastebud tickler!

"It's got fresh-laid eggs and Jarzey milk for the egg custard pudding base," she went on, "on top of a crumbly tart base. The slightly bitter taste of the caramel sauce is supposed to balance out the mildness of the custard pudding. ...Or so this card says."

She finished reading the note from the chef before looking at me, her eyes suddenly widening.

"Hehe! Oh, Vi!" she giggled. "You should see your face. You're going to drool all over the table."

If you've time to giggle, you've time to feed me! After all, I worked hard today, too!

I batted her hand with my paw and she nodded. "All right, all right," she said.

Then, smiling, she poured on the caramel sauce. Finally, she pinched off a piece of the tart with her fingers and made a bite-sized portion for me.

Without hesitation, I gobbled up my piece. How to describe the moment my fangs sank into that tart? The bittersweet taste of the caramel sauce, the wobbly texture of the pudding, and finally, that crunchy, crunchy tart base. From flavor to mouthfeel, it was pure perfection.

"So cute..." Lady Seren was murmuring, stroking my back lovingly.

Chomping down on a masterpiece of a dessert whipped up by a master chef while having my back stroked by an adorable young lady—that's my idea of heaven!

Seren 8

Is Such a Future a Possibility for Me, Too?

I faced the tiny desert Vi had constructed on the tabletop and practiced my True Wind. Maddeningly, though, not a single particle of sand moved. I felt like crying. But I tried it again, then again. Before I knew it, time seemed to lose all relevance.

Wind is colorless and see-through. How am I supposed to visualize it? I couldn't think of anything to use as a crutch. Vi told me to "imagine wind dancing," but how was I supposed to do that? I couldn't.

"It's all right," Vi said kindly. "Everyone has trouble with it at first. Starting over fresh tomorrow often leads to better results."

Vi was so sweet. He not only remained even-tempered with me but also tried bolstering me with words of encouragement. Still, I felt guilty and gnashed my teeth in frustration.

Why can't I do it?

It was as simple as the act of using a fan to cool myself. I should've been able to kick up at least a tiny breeze.

As I agonized over it, an idea suddenly came to me. I rose from my seat, grabbed a fan, and returned, using it to kick up a breeze toward the desert on the table. Once I was sure the grains of sand were beginning to roll gently, I closed the fan and visualized a transparent one in my hand, calling forth my magic as I flapped my hand back and forth.

The sand grains kept rolling...exactly the same way!

This is it...!

Finally, I had threaded the needle! Imagining transparent air had been a concept completely lost on me. But imagining a fan; now, *that* was a handy shortcut! I pretended like the fan I had closed was still open in my hand, making

quick circular flicks of my wrist.

The wind formed a slim, tubular shape and slowly began to rise. It wasn't perfectly circular, but it really was starting to look like a cyclone!

Relief washed over me, and I glanced out the window to see the sky outside was growing white with the coming dawn.

"...?!"

How can this be?! When did it get so late...or so early?

Blanching, I looked at Vi. He was collapsed on the chair. His tail swung listlessly; he looked spent. But he'd been cheering me on in a bright tone, saying "Yes, yes, you've got it!"

I felt terrible. This wasn't even the first time I'd kept him up all night for magic practice. How thoughtless I was, becoming so engrossed in my work that I would subject my kind tutor to this kind of treatment!

"I'm so sorry, Vi! I was being terribly selfish."

I couldn't undo what had been done, but I felt so terrible, I kept apologizing to him over and over. The cute black cat sniffed, then made a request of his own.

"Hmm... No sweets for me today?"

When I explained there was, he said, "Then let that settle things between us. Everything your family's pâtissier makes is delectable."

The black cat put his nose up in the air, and I quickly hurried over to the bedside table and grabbed the basket I'd prepared earlier before running back over.

Today I had a new kind of tart the chef was particularly proud of. I knew Vi would love it. Once I returned, the desert on the tabletop was gone, as if it'd never even been there. I was struck all over again by Vi's brilliance.

Vi leaped up onto the table and began to lightly paw at the surface, as if saying "Hurry up, hurry up!"

So cute! I just couldn't suppress a smile.

I put the basket down on the table and Vi came zooming over as if he couldn't

wait a moment longer. Then he took a big sniff. I hadn't even opened the lid yet, but he was trembling with joy.

How I love that sappy expression on his face! It's exactly the same look your master wore as he sat on that bench, contemplating a cupcake.

"It smells...exquisite...!"

Vi's choice of words was so overblown, a chuckle slipped from my lips.

"Hehe, Vi, your nose, ears, and whiskers are all quivering! Does it really smell that good?"

I opened the lid of the basket, teasing him just a little, and removed the dessert from inside. Vi began pacing in front of my hands, scrutinizing the dessert with keen eyes.

"It's a tart base," he said, "but...it doesn't smell like cream cheese, does it?"

It is a tart, yes. But yes, it's not made of cream cheese. Oh, there's a small card inside the basket.

I removed the card from the basket and scanned it. The kind message written on it filled my heart with sudden warmth.

I'd never had much appetite as a child, but I still tended to force-feed myself. Concerned, the kindly chef did his best to prepare foods for me that were easy to eat and good for digestion. I guessed he must be getting on in years, but he still had a curious spirit and seemed to enjoy tackling new culinary challenges.

According to the chef's note, this was a baked egg custard tart. The baked tart was filled with egg custard then rebaked. It was a ground-breaking dessert, so typical of the adventurous chef.

The note went on to say the caramel sauce should be poured over the tart just prior to eating. When I read that aloud, then looked up at Vi, I noticed that he was staring at the tart with sparkling eyes, his little jaw hanging loose.

"Hehe! Oh, Vi! You should see your face. You're going to drool all over the table," I giggled.

Vi impatiently batted at my hand, clearly unable to wait a second longer. His excitement was so adorable! I poured on the caramel sauce then brought a

piece to Vi's furry lips. He gobbled it down without a moment's hesitation.

So cute!!!

He kept gobbling the baked egg custard tart out of my hand. Busily licking my palm, Vi managed not to miss a single drop of the caramel sauce. He looked so sweet, his little head bobbing about.

"So cute..."

I reached down and stroked his soft back.

"It's *really* good, isn't it? Since you seem to like it so much, I'm sure your master, Lord Viol, would love it too. I'd love to offer Lord Viol a slice as well."

No doubt he'd eat it up with gusto and joy. Just imagining it made my chest constrict with excitement.

"Speaking of which...Lord Viol asked me to dance. But...I wonder if Marietta could really be right about what she was saying..."

While Vi was engrossed in enjoying his egg custard tart, I found myself mumbling.

It wasn't like I was after an answer; I was more talking to myself. But Vi stopped scoffing down the egg custard tart and stiffened, ears sticking straight up. Then he slowly lifted his head to look up at me...before averting his gaze again.

"Marietta...she's your younger sister, isn't she? What has she been saying?"

"Oh! *Hehe*, nothing important," I blushed. "It's embarrassing, though. Don't tell Lord Viol, will you?"

I booped him on his little nose before offering him the last piece of tart and saying: "There's only a little left. So eat up, okay?"

Even though I was talking to a cat, it felt embarrassing to have him question me with such clear interest. As if he knew how I felt, Vi returned his attentions to the tart, eating the very last crumbs. But all the while, his ears remained pricked up in my direction. He was listening closely; that was obvious.

I leaned in, bringing my lips to those velvety ears, as if to tell him a secret. I

took a deep breath, preparing myself for Vi to rebuke me with a cry of “What utter nonsense!”

“So, the thing is... Marietta...said that balls are where you ask people you have feelings for to dance. She said that all the men who asked me to dance that night have feelings for me! She was *most* insistent about it too! Have you ever heard such silliness?”

All of a sudden, Vi began to choke. Coughing and hacking, his tiny body constricted painfully.

“Oh goodness! What should I do?! What’s the procedure when a cat is choking?!”

M-Maybe I should clap him on the back? Goodness, I’m no use at all, am I? Poor Vi!!!

“Vi! Oh, Vi! Are you all right? I don’t know what to do! Should I call someone?”

“I’m... I’m all right...”

I held out my hand to steady him, but Vi scampered away.

“I’m fine now.”

But he kept coughing and hacking most alarmingly. I felt terrible that I could do nothing to help. I softly stroked his back until he said, “Thank you, but I’m fine now...really.”

“You gave me such a fright! I didn’t know cats *could* choke.”

“I just learned that myself.”

Vi heaved a sigh and curled up on the table. He must’ve been tired from all the choking. I gave the table a quick wipe before I spoke again.

“Sorry, Vi... I know I was saying ridiculous things just then.”

“No, no, it’s not your fault, Lady Seren. But, uh...as to what your sister said... I must say that she’s not wrong. I’ve heard...much the same sort of thing myself.”

“You’re so knowledgeable, Vi. I think I knew it too, in a commonsense sort of way...but I was never asked to dance before, so it never seemed to apply to me.

Marietta was quite cross with me, actually.”

“What’s her issue now?”

“I told her I was sure they all had other, perfectly explainable reasons for asking me to dance. Then she said I was being extremely rude and disrespecting the amount of courage it must’ve taken them to invite me. I don’t think I’ve ever *seen* her so angry with me.”

“*Hmm...* Unexpected. So, it seems your sister holds these dance partners of yours in high regard.”

“Oh yes, indeed! She said it takes tremendous guts for a man to ask a woman to dance. She wanted me to understand how they must’ve felt. I must admit, I felt very ashamed of myself.”

“I see. I thought that being asked to dance was nothing more than an annoying custom that ladies must endure. But phrased that way, I can see what your sister was getting at.”

“Right? And Marietta gets asked to dance all the time. It must get very tiresome for her; she’s truly a wonderful girl.”

As I said that, Vi looked up at me with an expression of deep interest on his face.

“Incidentally, you just said you think each man must’ve had explainable reasons for inviting you to dance. Out of curiosity...what do you think those were?”

“I think Borden wanted to come to Lord Viol’s rescue. And Borden probably asked Riesz to step up. And Mashlo has such a big crush on Marietta, so...he probably just wanted to use me for dance practice.”

“And... And my master?”

“P-Pardon?”

“Why did my master ask you to dance...do you think?”

Vi’s big black pupils were fixed on mine, but they seemed to be...brimming with emotion. For some reason, I felt embarrassed. After all, those eyes looked so *very* much like Lord Viol’s when I’d gazed up at him as we danced together.

“That’s the one I can’t figure out...”

I stroked Vi slowly, from his forehead to the tip of his tail, to soothe me as I gathered my thoughts.

“I feel that...,” I said slowly, “he’s the type who feels a great sense of responsibility for things. I’m sure he wanted to check that I was making progress in my magic learning. And I *told* Marietta that. But I’m...not so sure...”

I looked down into those glittering black eyes.

“Say, Vi... What do you think? Why *did* Lord Viol ask me to dance?”

“Dunno...”

Vi brushed off my question, getting to his feet. He closed his eyes and actually nuzzled my hand with his cheek. The feel of his soft fur against the back of my hand was heavenly.

I was touched by this uncharacteristically affectionate gesture. Vi, too, narrowed his eyes in pleasure. Then his eyelids snapped open, and he gazed right up at me.

He stood on the table now, bringing his glittering eyes even closer to mine than before. I was struck all over again by how beautiful they were.

“Lady Seren... I’m not privy to my master’s private thoughts. But...”

Then suddenly, Vi pulled away from my hand and leaped from the table to the balcony door. There he turned back and kept speaking in a subdued tone.

“But for him to take lessons in dancing—an art form he finds so disagreeable — simply so he could ask you to dance... Well...”

As he spoke, Vi clawed at the door. He looked so cute. I got up to go and open the door for him. Once it was open, Vi turned to give me one last, hard look.

“So what I’m saying is...I think it could be...well, you know...”



Then with that, he disappeared into the night. It was almost like he was inviting me to think it over myself. I gazed out at the coming dawn and giggled softly to myself.

Why is Vi getting all bashful?

I stared in the direction he'd vanished for a few moments. The dawn brightened around me. Once I realized this, I quickly closed the window again.

I still had enough time to catch an hour of sleep. *It's better than no sleep at all. I have to at least get into bed and lay down.* I went over and tried to get comfy, but sleep eluded me. *Of course... I should've used my fainting trick.*

As I lay there, my conversation with Vi kept replaying in my mind.

Vi said that Lord Viol had learned dance, an art form he found "disagreeable," all to ask me to dance. *So, he's saying this is a sign of Lord Viol...being in love with me?!*

If Marietta was right, then it was certainly possible that Lord Viol had taken a romantic interest in me, based on the few times we had spoken in person.

But...is that possible?

Is it possible for someone like me to truly love a man...and be loved in return? The thought made my heart begin to pound.

What a lovely, lovely thought that was...

As soon as I'd decided to take the path of a High Mage and dissolve my royal engagement, I was determined to serve my country to the best of my ability another way.

Serving the country nobly as a High Mage was a wonderful thing. But as a woman, my reputation would be ruined after breaking such a high-profile engagement. No men would be lining up to offer to marry me, that was for sure.

Marietta had taught me a lot about balls and parties, but my days of being invited to dance by men were numbered. The next ball would be my last. Once I became a High Mage, I'd be given a respectful, wide berth. And besides, I was certain I would no longer choose to attend any balls if no longer required to do

so.

I had made up my mind to dissolve the engagement. The last ball aside, no man had ever shown much interest in me or asked me to dance, after all. I was sure that I'd soon stop thinking of myself as a feminine woman at all and would never develop romantic feelings for anyone.

But even if I never had a special man in my life, I'd made up my mind to always devote myself to my kingdom, family, and all the other subjects and give all my love in service of them.

I thought it'd be enough for me to do my best for my country.

But...

This prickling sensation in my chest. It was a sign that a part of me still hadn't completely given up on the concept of finding romantic love.

Perhaps it's not too late. Perhaps I can still fall in love and be loved in return...

Perhaps even *my* heart could skip a beat, seeing a smile on the face of someone I loved. Being moved by their tears, bolstered by their praise, delighted by their joy. Seeing them change and grow over the years.

I was so glad. I knew I had Lord Viol and Vi to thank for this.

Ever since the day I'd heard those devastating words in the salon, I was sure I'd never hope for love again.

But then Lord Viol took me on. The plan for me to take a High Mage's path had been what saved my soul. And with my most excellent tutor, Vi, I was able to completely immerse myself in my magical studies. How soothing it'd all been!

And now here I was, working hard toward my future, feeling hopeful with no lingering sense of despair left. No doubt, it was all because of my two new friends. I thought of Vi's adorable fuzzy face. Of Lord Viol's composed expression, gazing into my eyes as we danced. I knew I was blushing.

And I was still thinking about what Vi had said, his words as fresh as if they'd just been spoken aloud.

"But for him to take lessons in dancing—an art form he finds so disagreeable

— simply so he could ask you to dance... Well...”

A part of me couldn't believe it. But another part was...*delighted*. I was shocked to find myself feeling that way.

This...must be because...I have feelings for Lord Viol.

We had only spoken a handful of times, yes. But even so, I found him wonderful. His innocent love of sweets. The way he took responsibility. His kindness and gallant gestures.

In truth, I'd spent much more time with Vi. Perhaps my feelings toward Lord Viol were one-sided. If you asked me if I loved him...I honestly couldn't answer either way.

But I wanted to talk to him more. I wanted to know so much more about him! I wanted to eat sweets together, learn magic directly from him, and dance with him again. I wanted to go out on the town with him, see where he took me and how he reacted to certain things. Just thinking about spending time with him, doing nothing in particular...it seemed like so much fun.

I'd be so happy if only Lord Viol felt the same way.

I knew that such a happy occurrence was a rare thing to hope for. But at the same time, I wished for a miracle with my whole heart.

Enjoying this feeling of warmth and happiness that filled my heart and soul, I closed my eyes and finally fell asleep.

Contard 1

Side Story: I Saw Something Unbelievable

“HMM...” I suppose I should go looking for him.”

Gazing at the clock on my office wall, I sighed deeply.

Archmage Viol had left earlier, saying he was just going for a breath of air. That'd been about an hour ago. There were no specific meetings on the agenda today, and he often disappeared during the day here and there, so he'd probably be fine left to his own devices.

Even so, I couldn't relax and eventually got up from my seat. I would go and look for him, after all.

Archmage Viol always asked to be left alone. But I *was* his assistant, so leave him alone, I could not. *I wished he'd at least deign to tell me where he goes when he disappears!*

I hurried out of the office and down the corridor of the mage quarters, mulling things over.

Archmage Viol was a truly strange individual.

First off, he barely ever spoke.

As his assistant, I prided myself on knowing all there was to know about the Frosty Archmage of the Third Mage Guild. His hobbies, likes, dislikes, how he spent his private time, where he went on his days off, *etc.* But he never told me anything! He was a true magic nut, totally devoted to his work. His perfectionism was off the scales. I knew that much. No doubt that was his public image across the whole kingdom.

But perhaps it was partly my fault. I was timid; I found it difficult to approach him and start a conversation.

I mean...the man was scary!

Those black robes...like some sort of dark sorcerer. His stony expression that almost didn't seem human. He seemed more like some sort of doll or wax figure; that was how rarely his facial muscles moved.

If you looked closely, you might notice the crease between his brows deepening by a millimeter or so. But apart from that, it was impossible to tell if he was pleased, angry, or despondent. You had no idea what the man was thinking...and that was scary!

But the thing that made me tremble the most was Archmage Viol's formidable magic.

I'm a specialist when it comes to evaluating magical qualities. Apparently, I was earmarked to be his assistant by my predecessor, who liked that I *had* such a specialty. I couldn't read Archmage Viol's stony expression, but I could no doubt tell how he was doing and feeling just by assessing his magic's qualities at any given time. Or so my predecessor thought. *Such a meddling fellow...*

But the man had been Archmage Viol's assistant for many years and knew what he was talking about. With my skills, he had probably figured I'd learn to read Archmage Viol's magic in no time. The only misjudgment made was about *my* character. Reading his magic made me shrivel and tremble in my boots.

I felt Archmage Viol was a misanthrope; a man who hated his fellow humans. Or at least found them highly disagreeable. He used magic against them. He cast spells to discourage them from approaching him, like a plant grows protective thorns.

He used such spells on me, too. The first time I approached him, he shied away, which he'd never done to my predecessor. This filled me with dismay.

In a way, it made sense. I was a stranger and hadn't shared all he and his predecessor had shared. Perhaps he himself wasn't aware that he'd cast such a spell against me.

At any rate, he remained stony-faced toward me, as he had done toward my predecessor. It frightened me that he was so expressive of his true feelings only in his magic while looking so blank-faced and impassive.

Once I took up my post, I noticed the prickly deflective spell he used was a

form of self-protection. He never cast it when he was safely sequestered in his office, working away on his beloved magic. But when someone else entered the room or if I even approached his desk, he'd suddenly prick out like a hedgehog. When I spoke to him, it seemed to grow thicker, and the number of "thorns" seemed to increase exponentially. They shrank back when he began to calm. Why couldn't I read any perceptible change in his facial expressions, though? How it vexed me!

I observed him closely, hoping to notice some correlation between his prickling defense spell and his facial expressions. Before long, my eyes were practically glued to Archmage Viol as I followed his every move.

There's at least one thing, I reflected as I walked along, that I can pick up on: when he's really, really mad. His face doesn't change much, of course, except for that frown line getting deeper. It's his magic. It takes on a black hue and billows up from his body like smoke, almost like the devil himself has risen. It's terrifying!

Those without the power to read a person's magic still sense the pressure that comes from his sharp magic aura and his burning anger. But since his perfect mask never cracks and he never raises his voice, they all call him "Frosty Archmage" and give him all the respect a name like that ought to command.

It's like he's a stray cat, wary of everyone, always with his guard up.

But with his subordinates, whom he sees often, his prickly magic is kept tuned to a low frequency. And even when it comes to me, his magical aura now runs on a much softer frequency than when we first met.

Perhaps he's gotten used to me being around. Well...a little bit, anyway...

I left the mage quarters and headed off in search of Archmage Viol, hoping in my heart that my feelings were right and that he was slowly warming to me.



AH, there he is!

I spotted Archmage Viol sitting on a bench situated down the alleyway between the palace and the mage quarters, gazing intently at a passing black cat. I hurried over as quickly as I could.

Archmage Viol had been acting quite strangely lately.

Often when he disappeared out of the blue, I'd find him sitting on this bench, staring into space or reading a book. Or sometimes staring at that cat, like he was right now.

In the past, it was rare for Archmage Viol to ever leave his rooms. What had prompted this drastic change of heart?

Well, I've only been Archmage Viol's assistant for a little over a month. Maybe this has always been his favorite bench spot. I had assumed he wasn't interested in anything except magic, so this sudden change of behavior struck me as odd.

From this distance, it seemed he wasn't humming with his usual harsh magical energy. He appeared completely relaxed. I could see both his physical body and magical aura, so he clearly didn't mind being perceived.

Archmage Viol's secretive magic wasn't your ordinary stuff. It was all very high-spec. If he wanted to, he could completely isolate himself, leaving not a trace of magic or his presence behind. Even someone like me could be standing right next to him and not have a clue where he was.

But he wasn't casting any magic at all right now, so it would probably be all right for me to approach him.

With my mind made up, I made my way over to him when I noticed something.

...Ah. Is he perhaps...feeding that cat?

So...even Archmage "I've Misplaced My Emotions" Viol has a soft side. And yet, even while feeding a cat, he never said things like "Here, puss puss!" and "Who's a widdle cutie?" or the other sorts of things you usually heard people say while interacting with cute animals.

He just frowned, his eyes fixed sharply on the cat, as he held out his hand full of—I gasped.

"Ah!!!"

Archmage Viol jumped in his seat. *Or did he? Perhaps my mind is tricking me...*

“...Oh, Contard. It’s you. What is it?”

What indeed! Always the poker face!

“You can’t feed fruitcake like that to a cat, Archmage Viol! Look! I thought so! It’s chock-full of raisins!”

The poor feline looked about ready to choke any minute. I dashed over without a second thought and yanked the fruitcake from its mouth. The cat looked forlorn and let out a plaintive “Meeeow!” *Please don’t give me that look! I was only acting in your best interest, cat!*

“Cats can’t have raisins?” Archmage Viol asked, dumbfounded.

“No, they can’t!” I cried. “Cats can’t eat chocolate or raisins like humans! It’s terribly bad for them! You must never give sweets to a cat!”

As I paused for breath, I realized what I’d done.

I had forgotten myself in the heat of the moment and spoken my mind...

I raised my eyes tremulously to the still-silent Archmage Viol. As expected, his face was utterly blank as he stared at me. *There’s zero emotion there, as usual. Ah! But his furrowed brow! It’s deepened slightly.*

G-Goodness! His brow furrow! It’s growing deeper still!!!

I could feel his magical energy zing. *What is this?! Is he angry?!*

“Yeek! F-F-Forgive me, Archmage Viol! I’ve overstepped my bounds...!”

I quickly bowed in contrition.

What am I thinking?! I should’ve left him well alone! Oh! But then, the poor cat...

My mind was awirl with self-doubting thoughts. *Why did I shout at Archmage Viol over feeding a cat? I’ve totally overstepped my bounds. Now he’ll hate me, and his prickly, dangerous magical aura will grow thicker. If that happens...I honestly might cry!*

At the end of the day, the thought of being hated and shunned by Archmage Viol was too much to bear. I wanted him to accept me as his assistant and dispense with his prickly magical shell.

Realizing how much I wanted that made me feel so...pathetic.

I risked another peek at Archmage Viol. He was as blank-faced as always. I couldn't begin to guess what he might be thinking.

"...I'm not angry. I actually didn't know. Thanks for stepping in."

"Er... R-Really? Oh. Good..."

The prickly magic aura...it's calmed down some! The ominous trembling nature of his magic...wasn't rage after all! Oh, phew!

"Are there any other foodstuffs I should be aware of?"

"What?"

"For cats..."

Oh, right. Cats... So he intends to feed one again, does he? Perhaps he's a secret cat lover...

"Onions," I replied. "And nuts. And obviously alcohol."

"I see," he said. "That's quite a lot. Well, I'll be careful."

The cat leaped up onto his lap as if suspecting he might still be hiding treats. Archmage Viol began to awkwardly pet it. *Did he bring the fruitcake just to give it to this cat? Perhaps he frequents this bench often to try and see the cat. If true...that's pretty adorable!*

I looked more closely. His prickling magical aura seemed to have dissipated now that he was petting the cat. Usually, it was two palms thick whenever he talked with me. *I've lost to a feline.*

Curse it! You lucky cat! Complete acceptance!

"Next time, I'll bring something good for you to eat," Archmage Viol said softly. Petting the cat one final time, he got to his feet. Apparently, he felt like returning to his office now. "Was there something you wanted to tell me?" he asked.

"Ah, no!" I replied. "I was just worried. An hour passed, and you hadn't come back, so I came looking for you."

"...I *told* you I was just going for a breath of air. I really do wish you'd leave me

alone.”

Ah, our old back and forth. But I was anxious by nature, and I knew habit would force me to come looking for him next time too.

“But if I don’t know where you’re going,” I protested, “I can’t reach you in case of an emergency. What if you passed out somewhere and I didn’t know where?”

“...I get plenty of sleep at night. And besides, I’m not yet old enough for there to be any risk of me keeling over and passing out during the day.”

That! May be true! But!

“Still, I see your point. You were worried since you didn’t know where I’d gone to.” Now Archmage Viol was nodding understandingly. “Next time, I’ll announce my destination upon departure,” he said.

Huh. He’s oddly amenable for a man who uses prickling magic to keep people at bay.

We headed back to the mage quarters together, me monitoring his use of prickling magic as we went. I thought about it. With people he knew, his prickling magic aura grew an arm’s length thick. With strangers, it was double that. But with me? Only two palms thick. *That has to mean something, right?* The thought made me feel much more confident.

Yes. I had been much too afraid of him. The truth was Archmage Viol hadn’t been angry with me at all. *I should really be more confident and make more of an attempt to engage him in conversation. That’s what I should do.*



AFTER that day, I made an effort to engage Archmage Viol in conversation more often. At first, he seemed wary and his prickling spell intensified. It also took a few moments for me to get a response. But with time, he seemed to relax more around me and began answering at a normal rate. ...At least, I thought so.

And he also began telling me where he’d be going when he left on his breaks. I was surprised at just how amenable he was being. I tried only to go searching

for him when there was some sort of urgent issue. Still, I rather missed searching for him. *Humans are awfully self-serving...*

There was one day when he stayed away for an hour and a half. Worried, I went to the bench in search of him. He seemed to have really cracked, since I found him asleep on the bench with the cat snoozing on his lap. The sight of them made my own eyelids feel heavy.

He still used his prickling magic as self-defense and seemed to have difficulty communicating with others. But now, I found him much less frightening than I did before. No doubt he was a misanthrope who hated his fellow man. But he still did his best to navigate society so as not to face any obstacles to his true passion: his work.

And the two of us seemed to understand each other well enough now and were able to work well together.

It was amazing progress.

Then, one night, I witnessed something unbelievable.

Archmage Viol suddenly announced he actually intended to attend one of the royal balls. I was quite nervous for him, so I decided to follow him when he left early for the ball. Being a middle-ranking aristocrat myself, I reasoned that, if Archmage Viol got himself into any trouble, I'd be able to help.

But once he entered the ballroom, Archmage Viol began emitting an aura of "Don't touch me, don't talk to me, stay away from me," his prickling magic humming and buzzing in full force. I could only smile wryly.

The young ladies couldn't sense his magic aura, of course. And they didn't seem to care about his prickly demeanor, either. They entreated him to dance! But he ignored them all and disappeared into the crowd. *What'd he even come here for?* I wondered.

I recalled my predecessor telling me that Archmage Viol was on friendly terms with Prime Minister Borden. *Perhaps he came to do some business with Borden?* Both were geniuses; no doubt they were on the same wavelength. Or so I assumed.

All of a sudden, Archmage Viol's prickling magic disappeared, like a flame

being snuffed out.

I wasn't sure if my eyes were deceiving me. I had to blink several times. But no...I wasn't mistaken. I wondered what could possibly be going on. Archmage Viol made his way through the crowd. So curious I could barely stand it, I scuttled after him. Then I positioned myself where I could get a good view of him.

Finally, he stopped in front of a young lady. And he was actually...*smiling!*

The young ladies around me began to sigh and squeal. He certainly *did* look handsome tonight.

But wait...isn't that Lady Seren? She's Prince Helios's fiancée, isn't she? She's a very, very, very important person! And quite brilliant too, I've heard.

Why let his guard down so completely in front of Lady Seren, though?! And his smile! I hadn't seen that even once, and I'd worked with him every day for two months!

What's more...now he was using his prickling spell again, but like a cocoon around himself and Lady Seren! As if to tell everyone else: "Back off! Give us space!"

I couldn't believe it! He'd let someone else inside his cocoon!!!

What?! What kind of relationship do these two have?

I felt very afraid. But, as Archmage Viol's assistant, I *had* to know the details of the situation. I made my way through the crowd and got up close enough to hear them talk. What I heard made me instantly relax.

Ah, apparently, he's been teaching Lady Seren magic of some sort.

But wait! That doesn't explain why this skittish, stray cat of a mage would open his heart so fully to her!

While I stood there, screaming mentally, Archmage Viol leaned in to ask Lady Seren a question.

"That is... Would you dance one dance with me, perhaps?"

Lady Seren's eyes widened in surprise. The young ladies nearby practically

screamed. But none was more shocked than I. I felt like I might faint.

“...Is it an impossibility, after all?”

I picked up on the note of quiet longing in his voice. My eyes narrowed as I scrutinized Archmage Viol.

Could it be? He's...in love...with Lady Seren?

This was the second major shock I'd suffered lately, next to finding him snoozing on a bench with a cat on his lap. This wax figure of a man, having deep feelings like this... Jaw still hanging in disbelief, I could only watch as the two began to dance together, clearly enjoying the moment.

Even though Archmage Viol stepped on her foot... Even though that made Prince Helios angry... Even though Prime Minister Borden then had to sweep in and save him like the coolest hero in the room.

I was shocked. Always so capable in his work, Archmage Viol was acting like a bumbling fool. *He's clearly head over heels for Lady Seren. But she's Prince Helios's fiancée!*

And yet, an unbelievable scene was now playing itself out in front of my eyes. Lady Seren, who before now had only danced with her fiancé, was asked to dance by a succession of other men!

No, it makes sense...

After she'd publicly danced with both Archmage Viol and Prime Minister Borden, the other men saw her as fair game to be pursued for a dance. Still, what a shock. Who knew Lady Seren had such a cadre of secret admirers?

Archmage Viol watched her dance, his face as immobile as ever. He'd spun his web of privacy too tightly around himself and couldn't express his raw and trembling emotions. His was a love that could never make itself known.

I gazed at his stern, stiff profile and thought hard to myself.

It was a one-sided love, obviously. Archmage Viol was clearly mad about Lady Seren. But when I eavesdropped on their conversation earlier, it'd been stiff and formal. Clearly, they hadn't talked much with one another. And Lady

Seren's eyes had widened in such shock when he asked her to dance.

It made sense. Lady Seren was very proper and would no doubt limit her conversations with Archmage Viol to strictly business.

But for all his handsome looks, his high status, and his high-powered job, Archmage Viol was still a man at heart. A man in love. My heart ached for him.

I'd have to start being even nicer to him, beginning tomorrow.

At the very least...I'd try.



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THE DRAGON'S SOULMATE IS A MUSHROOM PRINCESS!

STORY BY: HANAMI NISHINE
ILLUSTRATION BY: POPORUCHA
SERIES | OUT NOW

What happens when a half-fae noblewoman with the power to make mushrooms grow when she gets emotional meets a dragon prince who has a thing for mushrooms? Romantic comedy gold!

SO YOU WANT TO LIVE THE SLOW LIFE? A GUIDE TO LIFE IN THE BEASTLY WILDS

STORY BY: FUUROU
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EVEN DOGS GO TO OTHER WORLDS: LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY BELOVED HOUND

STORY BY: RYUOU
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SERIES | OUT NOW

Everyone knows humans get transported to other worlds, but now dogs do too? Join Takumi as he navigates a fantasy world with his dog-turned-fenrir!

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THE PRINCESS' SMILE

STORY BY: YUURI SEO
ILLUSTRATION BY: M/G
STANDALONE / PRE-ORDER NOW!

Sara enters a political marriage with the reclusive prince of a neighboring country, but as the princess' body-double?! And this prince just so happens to have a wolfish secret, too!

**SINCE I WAS ABANDONED
AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
COOK WITH MY FLUFFY FRIENDS**

STORY BY: YU SAKURAI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KASUMI NAGI
SERIES / OUT NOW

After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



I'D RATHER HAVE A CAT THAN A HAREM! VOLUME 1

STORY BY: KOSUZU KOBATO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HINANO CHANO
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Cats are better than harems! Amy has reincarnated into an otome game world as a villainess, but she's more interested in cats than boys!



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